

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Deciphering the difference between hooks
- » Unraveling yarn mysteries
- » Collecting other crochet accouterments
- » Holding the yarn and hook

Chapter **1**

Gearing Up and Getting Started

When embarking on a new project, gathering the necessary supplies is a must before you can even think about starting. To begin a new crochet design, you need a hook and some yarn, and you're all set to go.

Like most crafts, even those with the simplest needs, there are variations in the tools used. This chapter covers the differences between the various types of hooks available and when it's appropriate to use each type. Additionally, you can now find yarns available in a huge array of colors, textures, weights, and compositions. After you have a basic understanding of the more common yarns available, you will have an easier time choosing which yarn is best for your project.

And if you want to brush up on the best way to hold your hook and yarn, you'll find that information in this chapter, too.

Taking a Look at the Crochet Hook

A hook is one of two essentials for crocheting. (The other being yarn, of course — more on yarn later.) Choosing the proper crochet hook is essential to your comfort and the outcome of your design.

Crochet hooks are all basically the same in design. They each have a point, throat, shaft, and handle, and most (except the largest sizes) have a thumb rest (see Figure 1-1).

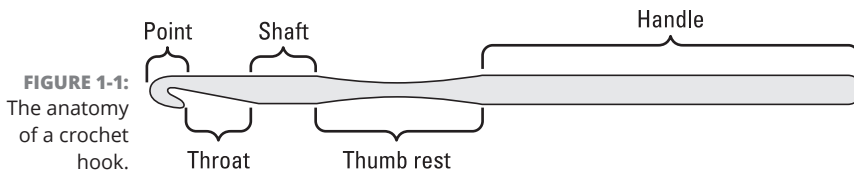


FIGURE 1-1:
The anatomy
of a crochet
hook.

You can, however, find subtle differences in the hook's shape. Some hooks have rounded points, which generally work easiest with thicker yarns, while others have sharper points that are ideal for thin yarns, wire, and other detail work. Some hooks have distinct, cutout throats that help to keep the yarn in place on the hook. Others have a smoother, more rounded throat, which enables you to work through stitches very quickly. As for which features to look for on your hook, it's just a matter of preference. Practice with every type to see which features you prefer. Sometimes it's just a matter of selecting the hook you like best for a particular yarn, stitch, or project.

Considering hook types and construction

Crochet hooks are typically divided into two primary categories, based on the diameter of the hook shaft. You can find hooks ranging from a fraction of a millimeter in diameter up to hooks larger than your finger. Depending on the size, a hook can be sorted into two primary categories:

- » **Standard:** These hooks are typically used when crocheting with yarn, and they range from 2 millimeters up to 20 millimeters in diameter.
- » **Steel:** These hooks are smaller and generally used when working with crochet thread, size 10 and smaller.

Steel hooks are made of, well, steel. But standard hooks can be made of different materials including aluminum, plastic, and even wood. The following list helps you weigh the pros and cons of each material:

- » **Aluminum:** These hooks are lightweight and smooth, helping you work with the yarn quickly and without catching. Aluminum hooks are some of the easiest to find and are often coated in a spectrum of colors.
- » **Plastic:** These hooks are also lightweight, but they can feel sticky to work with. While inexpensive, some crocheters feel the grippy plastic slows them down.
- » **Wood:** Crochet hooks can be made out of hard woods such as ebony, rosewood, and oak with fine woodworking techniques. These hooks are beautiful to look at, and, when made properly, can be as pleasant to use as your favorite aluminum workhorse. You also can likely find inexpensive bamboo hooks, even in your local megastore. These also have a bit more "grip" than aluminum, but many crafters enjoy how they stay warm in your hands.

For most of your crochet projects, the hook you'll require is generally 5 to 6 inches long and falls into one of the above categories. Don't be surprised to read about — or see in the store — other hook-ended tools, including

- » **Afghan hooks:** These hooks range from 12 to 16 inches in length, with a hook at one end and a knob at the other. These hooks are used for afghan or Tunisian stitches that require you to keep more than one loop on the hook shaft. For examples of some of these projects, check out Chapter 13.

» **Double-ended crochet hooks:** Also long like afghan hooks, these tools have a hook at each end. They are used for something called *double-ended crochet*, which makes a thick and reversible fabric.

Selecting the right size

There are two separate sizing categories when it comes to hooks, one for standard hooks and one for steel hooks. Knowing which is which is invaluable. The pattern that you're working from will give you the size hook used to crochet the original design. This is especially important because not only is it the proper size for the type of yarn used, but it also determines the size of the stitch it creates, which determines the gauge (see Chapter 2 for detailed gauge info). The gauge, in turn, determines the final size of the design.

Hooks come in a wide range of sizes (see Figure 1-2) and are labeled accordingly (most standard hooks are labeled with both the U.S. and Continental sizes). The labels are sometimes embossed on the side of the shaft. On other hooks, you may see a raised letter or number on the round end of the shaft. Hooks with padded or "comfort" grips may display this information on the grip.

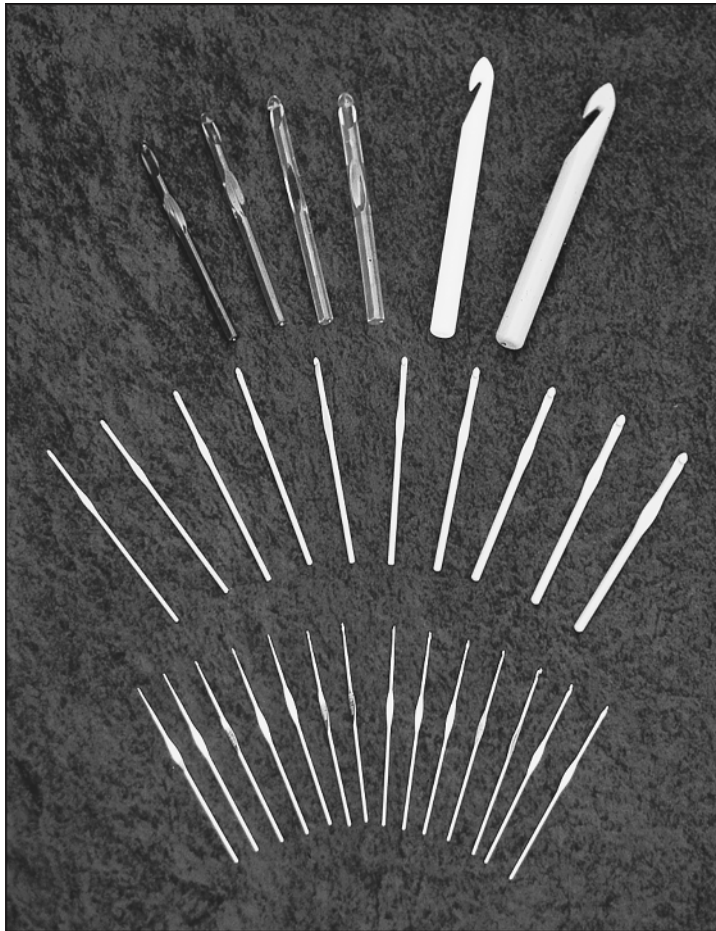


FIGURE 1-2: The wide array of sizes for both standard and steel hooks.

In the U.S. and Canada, standard hooks are labeled using letters, with B on the small end and S on the large end. In the U.S. and Canada, steel hooks are labeled using numbers. These hooks range from the smallest fraction of a millimeter to about 2 millimeters in diameter. Table 1-1 gives the most common sizes for steel crochet hooks and standard crochet hooks. Take note

that the U.S. and U.K. sizes for steel hooks are the opposite of what you'd expect — the larger the number, the smaller the hook. And the U.K. sizes for standard hooks are a bit backwards, too — the smaller the number, the larger the hook.

Table 1-1 Common Crochet Hook Sizes

Steel Crochet Hooks		
U.S. (American)	Continental (Metric)	U.K. (English)
6	1.8mm	3½
7	1.65mm	4
8	1.5mm	4½
9	1.4mm	5
10	1.3mm	5½
Standard Crochet Hooks		
U.S. (American)	Continental (Metric)	U.K. (English)
E-4	3½mm	9
F-5	3¾mm	(no equivalent)
G-6	4mm	8
G-7	4½mm	7
H-8	5mm	6
I-9	5½mm	5
J-10	6mm	4
K-10½	6½mm	3

Keeping your hooks in tiptop shape

Over time, you'll build up quite a collection of hooks. And although hooks aren't expensive, you don't want to have to run out and buy the same hook over and over again because you damaged or lost the first one you bought in that size. Follow this advice to keep your hooks like new and safe:

- » **Cleaning:** You may not think this is too important or wonder how the hooks get dirty. But if you stop to think about it, it becomes obvious. The hook is tucked in your hand or between your fingers for each and every stitch you work, and your hands have natural oils that protect the skin. Over time, these oils build up on your hook and may rub off on your yarn.
 - For your steel hooks, a good soaking in rubbing alcohol does the trick. Follow the bath by rubbing down the hook with a clean, soft cloth.
 - Aluminum and plastic hooks benefit from a thorough washing with a mild detergent. Dry completely before storage.
 - Wood hooks are a bit trickier to clean. Although most have been lacquered or coated to resist splintering, it's not advisable to soak or scrub the hook. Instead, use a damp cloth to wipe clean. Be sure to dry it with a clean towel almost immediately.
- » **Storing:** Proper storage ensures that the hook you need for your next project is ready, willing, and able for work when you are. Invest in a case specially made to store hooks. They are readily available at craft and yarn shops. If you can't find one, or don't want one, roll your hooks in a piece of felt, keeping them separated.



WARNING

Throwing your hooks in a bag or box can cause them to bang together, creating pits, which in turn can cause snags in the yarn as you work. Plastic hooks can bend and become warped as well as pit.

Comprehending Yarn Complexities

When I first started crocheting, choosing yarn wasn't much more difficult than deciding which color to use. Aside from crochet thread, there were only a couple different sizes, and no interesting textures. Colors were either solid or *variegated* (meaning they contain multiple colors). As I'm sure you've seen, that's not the case today. Just walk into the yarn aisle of your favorite craft store or any yarn shop, and you can literally spend hours sorting through the variety of colors and textures available.

Most of the time, you'll decide to make a particular project based on how the item looks; you like the overall design and the material it's made with. Although pictures are nice, you can't always see all the details, and understanding what type of yarn is used to craft the project can go a long way in determining if you'll really like the finished design. The important points to note about the materials can be found on the yarn label. Pay close attention to yarn size or weight and yarn content, but don't be afraid to mix it up. The "A ply for a ply: Swapping yarns" section later in this chapter tells you how.

A light discussion of yarn weights

When the word *weight* is used in relation to yarn, it generally means the thickness of the yarn. The thicker the yarn, the larger the stitches you'll be able to create.

Yarns are labeled with any of about a dozen names that all describe the weight of the yarn. You may see the words "worsted," "aran," "double knitting," "sport," or "chunky." All of these words (and several more) roughly correspond to the thickness of the yarns. So, if a pattern asks for a chunky yarn, you can't really use a substantially thinner sport weight and expect the same results. But you can expect all worsted-weight yarns to crochet to more or less the same fabric. These yarn weights correspond to the gauge, or number of stitches per inch, that you can expect to obtain while crocheting.

Figure 1-3 compares some of the more common weights and textures, but keep in mind that the photo is far from inclusive.

Over the course of the last few years, the yarn industry has been making inroads into standardizing yarn weights. This is really a wonderful effort because one particular weight of yarn can be called several different names (for example, yarns categorized as worsted, afghan, and aran all have the same weight).

So if you really love a project but don't like the suggested yarn, you can use the yarn-weight symbol to find another yarn of the same weight that will work just as well for the item. If the yarn or the pattern you like doesn't use a standard yarn-weight symbol, you can still substitute effectively. Just look at the gauge information provided on the ball band (or yarn label) and pattern and make sure they match. (Chapter 2 goes into more detail on the concept of gauge.)

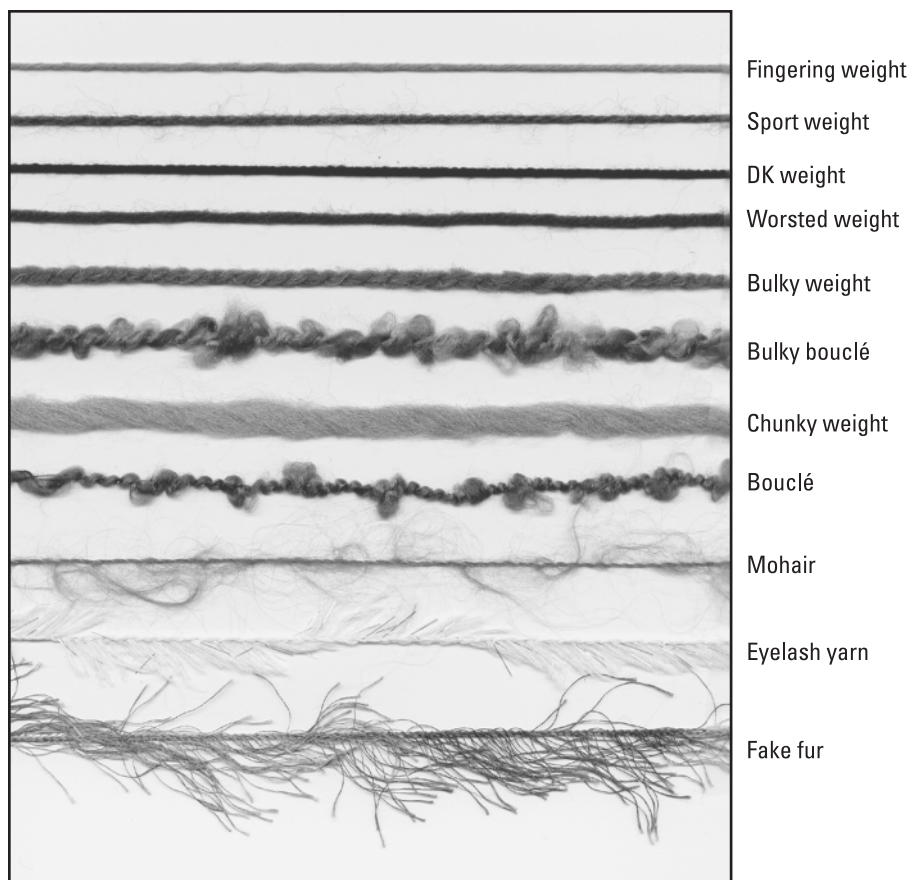


FIGURE 1-3: Comparison of commonly used yarn weights.

Understanding what your yarn is made of

Something to keep in mind when working with yarn is its composition. Do you prefer manmade materials, or are you a natural person? Yarns are readily available in both, and sometimes it comes down to your favorite choice. Garments are especially nice if they're made of natural fibers such as wool, silk, or cotton, while items such as afghans lend themselves to synthetic fibers, such as acrylic, mainly because of the reasonable cost and ease of care.

When beginning to crochet, most people find it easiest to learn on a smooth wool or wool/acrylic blend. Although pure acrylic yarns are often the most inexpensive and easiest to find, they don't have much elasticity. When you're just starting out, this means your stitches may look more uneven than in a wool or wool-blend yarn. Slippery fibers, such as cotton or silk, create beautiful fabric but can be tough for an inexperienced crocheter to keep on the hook. After a little experience, you'll be able to crochet wonderfully with any yarn.

As far as price is concerned, on the cheaper end of the scale are usually pure acrylic and other manmade yarns. On the high end are cashmere, silk, and other luxury fibers. Workhorse wools, cottons, and blends of more than one fiber type fall in the middle of the spectrum.

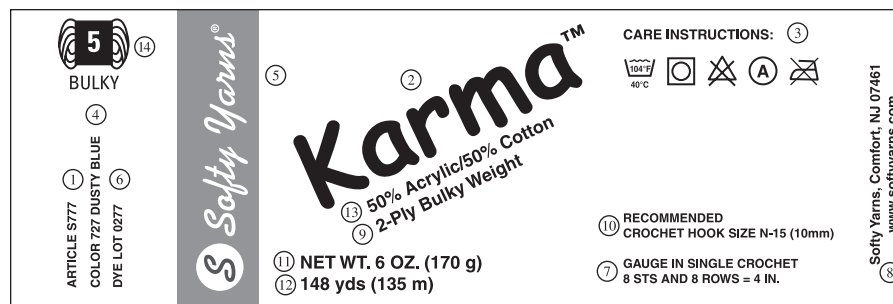
When looking for yarns of different fiber types, be aware that every store carries a different range of products. Although you may have a great variety of budget acrylic yarns at your local megastore, you may have to go to specialty yarn shops for pure silks and wools. But this is changing. It's now not uncommon to find great quality natural fibers in some of the same stores that were long known for carrying only synthetics.

Most patterns, however, specify a particular yarn because it makes the design what it is, so keep that in mind if you substitute a different brand or type of yarn. No matter what you do, that fluffy wool yarn won't look the same as a shiny cotton when crocheted.

Unraveling a yarn label

Whether packaged in a neat little ball, a long, log-like pull-skein, or a twisted skein or hank, all yarns come with a label that gives you invaluable information about its possible use with your project. As shown in Figure 1-4, all the information necessary to choose the right yarn can be found in one small space.

FIGURE 1-4:
Essential information located on a yarn label.



Yarn labels typically include most, if not all of the following information:

1. **Article number:** This is a code that the manufacturer uses to keep track of different products, and you won't always find an article number on a ball of yarn.
2. **Brand name:** This is the name of the yarn. For example, "Silk Purse," "Baby Soft," or "Regia 4ply."
3. **Care instructions:** Is easy care important to the project? If so, look for yarns labeled "Super wash" or that give care instructions that allow for machine wash and dry. More delicate yarns will tell you to hand wash or dry clean to prevent shrinking.
4. **Color name and number:** A particular yarn color is given a name or a number (or sometimes both) by the manufacturer.
5. **Company name and logo:** The manufacturer's name and logo will be prominently displayed on the label. Note that this should not be confused with the brand name of the yarn.
6. **Dye lot number:** Yarns that have been machine or hand dyed will include an identifying number that relates to the batch, or lot, in which the yarn was dyed. When a project requires more than one skein or ball of yarn, be sure to purchase yarn from the same dye lot if you want the colors to match perfectly. Yarns from different dye lots can have subtle (or not-so-subtle) variations in color that could have you seeing stripes.
7. **Gauge:** The suggested *gauge*, or number of stitches that fit in 4 inches, is often given on the label. Sometimes only a gauge in knitting is provided. Knitted gauge is given generically, such as "20 sts = 4 inches," and does not relate to the crochet gauge at all. More often than not, though, both knit and crochet gauges are given. For crochet, look for any crochet stitch abbreviation, usually "sc" (single crochet), or a small picture of a crochet hook next to a number. For example, "12 sc = 4 inches" is an example of crochet gauge.

8. **Manufacturer's address:** The yarn manufacturer's location is sometimes provided. It can be helpful if you need to find another source for its yarns. Increasingly, the manufacturer's website is being added, which can be a great resource for yarn information and sometimes free patterns.
9. **Ply:** Occasionally, a yarn label will provide *ply information*, such as 2 ply, 4 ply, or 12 ply, which means the number of strands that are twisted together to create the yarn. The number of plies does not correspond to the crochet gauge or the yarn weight. For example, it's possible to have a super-thick 2-ply or a super-thin 12-ply yarn, or vice versa.
10. **Recommended hook size:** When a crocheted gauge is given, a recommended hook size to obtain that gauge is also provided. You may need a different size hook to obtain the same gauge as the ball band or for the gauge provided in the pattern. (Read Chapter 2 for more details on gauge.)
11. **Weight:** The physical weight of the ball or skein of yarn will be listed. This may be in grams or ounces or both, depending on the country of origin.
12. **Yardage:** The length of the yarn will be given in yards and/or meters depending on the country of origin. Be sure to buy enough yards for your project. Don't be tempted to buy by weight only. Different types of yarn, even at the same thickness, contain vastly different yards per gram or ounce, and you don't want to run short.
13. **Fiber content:** By law, every commercially available yarn must include a detailed description of its fiber content. For example, you may see "100% merino wool" or blends such as "65% acrylic, 15% nylon, 15% elastane, 5% cotton."
14. **Yarn-weight symbol:** Many yarn companies are beginning to include this symbol, handy for yarn substitution, provided your pattern also includes the symbol. (See the section, "A light discussion of yarn weights," earlier in this chapter, for more on these symbols.)

A ply for a ply: Swapping yarns

Most patterns will tell you specifically which yarn to use for best results, but never forget that you have the option to substitute another yarn. Let your imagination go. With all the choices available, there's no reason not to make some changes to suit your own taste. (Appendix B contains a list of yarn companies and their web addresses for your browsing pleasure.)

Changing yarn can be as simple as choosing a different color of the same yarn used in the original pattern, or much more complex by picking a different yarn altogether. If you prefer wool and the pattern uses an acrylic yarn, you can look for a substitute. Just be sure to keep the following in mind:

» **Weight (or thickness):** If the pattern calls for a worsted- (or medium-) weight yarn, stick to that. Using a chunky-weight yarn (yarn that is heavier than worsted-weight) or sport-weight yarn (yarn that is lighter) will alter your results dramatically.

This is where the yarn-weight symbols come in handy. If your pattern and the yarn you want both use the symbols, be sure they match. Otherwise, check the gauge section of the yarn label and pattern to be sure the yarns crochet similarly. If your pattern gives only crocheted gauge, and the yarn label only knitted gauge, you may have to research the pattern yarn to determine its knitted gauge. This way, you can compare knitted gauges of the pattern yarn and the yarn you want to use. If the knitted gauges are the same, the new yarn you've

chosen will substitute nicely. (You can research knitted gauge on the Internet or by asking at your local yarn store.)

» **Yardage:** Make sure to purchase enough yarn. Every type and brand of yarn varies in terms of the yards per ball or skein. Even when buying a worsted-weight skein from company X and one from Y, you may see a difference in yards per skein. For example, if your pattern calls for five balls of X at 100 yards a ball, and you buy five balls of Y at 80 yards a ball, you'll be short by a full ball!

Buying enough yarn at the beginning of your project is important because most yarns have dye lots (see the section "Unraveling a yarn label" earlier in this chapter). Although you may not be able to see the subtle differences in color before the yarn is worked, when your piece is crocheted, you probably won't like the contrast. Better to be safe than sorry. Most shops will let you exchange or return unused, unopened skeins of yarn if you purchase too much.

Getting Your Fingers Moving

Whether you're brand-new to crochet or you learned the stitches years ago, it's well worth a few minutes to get a refresher on how to hold the hook and yarn and get started for your first few stitches.

To get started, you'll need a ball of yarn and a hook. Many beginners choose to practice using a size H-8 U.S. hook and worsted- or aran-weight yarn. Smooth yarn is easiest to work with at this point; too much texture makes it hard to see what you're holding.



TIP

Most of the instructions in this book are from a right-hander's perspective, but if you're a lefty, the same rules apply. You probably already have practice reversing directions, but here are a few tips to help you work from your point of view:

- » **Mirror it:** Hold the picture up to a mirror to get a reverse view. It may feel a bit clumsy, but it should work well enough to get you going.
- » **Flip it:** If you have a computer with a scanner, scan the illustration, and then use the photo software to flip the illustration horizontally. If you don't have a scanner, pull out some tracing paper and a pencil, trace the photo, and then view it from the opposite side.
- » **Go righty:** Try crocheting the right-handed way. You may be surprised to find that you're ambidextrous.

Holding the hook and yarn

Even though you use just one hook for crochet, both hands are involved in the action. Your dominant hand, the one you write with, holds and moves the hook. Your other hand is responsible for holding and tensioning the yarn.

You can hold the hook in one of two ways: over the hook, as in Figure 1-5, and under the hook, as in Figure 1-6. Neither grip is better or worse than the other. It's just a matter of what feels best in your hand.

FIGURE 1-5:
The over-the-hook position for left- and right-handers.

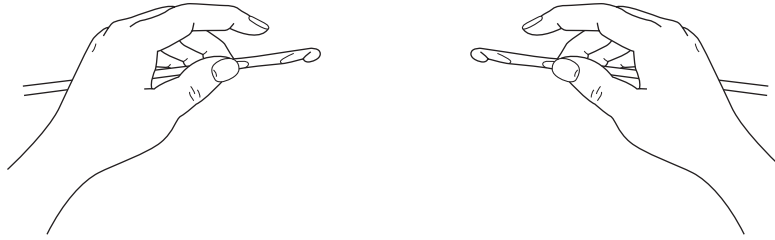
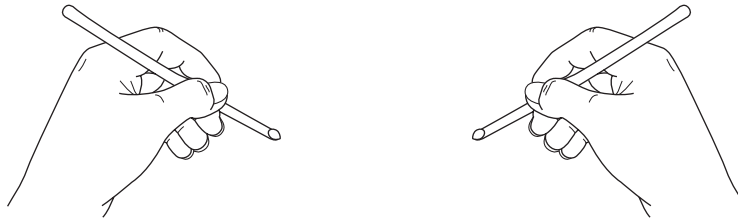


FIGURE 1-6:
The under-the-hook position for left- and right-handers.



Now, you use your other hand to get a hold on the yarn. If you're right-handed, you use your left hand. If you're a lefty, you use your right. Although you can work with the yarn many different ways, here's one of the more common methods (see Figure 1-7):

1. **With the ball or skein positioned below your hand, bring the yarn up between your ring and little fingers.**

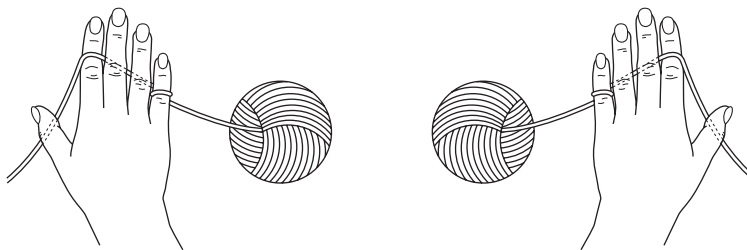
2. **Wrap the yarn around your little finger to create a loop.**

This keeps the yarn from moving too quickly through your fingers, causing loose and sloppy stitches.

3. **Bring the yarn under your ring and middle fingers, and up to the top of your hand between your middle and forefinger.**

When you close your little, ring, and middle fingers to hold the yarn, you can use your forefinger to raise or lower the yarn. While you crochet, it's important to pay attention to the tension of the yarn. If it feels too loose, take time to readjust, working through the above steps.

FIGURE 1-7:
Wrapping the yarn over your hand helps maintain good tension.



Working with the hook and yarn together

You're comfortable holding your hook. You know how to control the yarn. Now you're ready to get the yarn on the hook and get crocheting. It all starts with a slipknot:

1. With about 6 inches of yarn, make a loop that looks like a pretzel (see Figure 1-8).
2. Insert your hook through the center of the loop, draw the yarn through the loop, and pull on the tail to tighten.

The slipknot should be loose enough to slide easily along the hook, but tight enough to avoid falling off. See Figure 1-9.

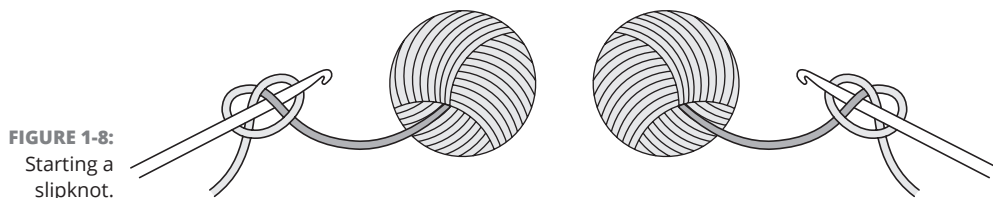


FIGURE 1-8:
Starting a slipknot.

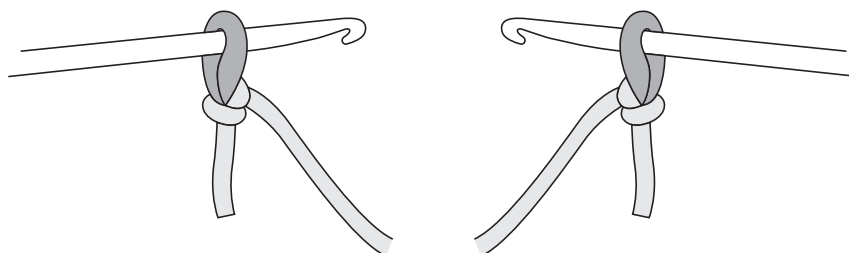


FIGURE 1-9:
The slipknot tightened on the hook.

When you put everything together, your setup should look like Figure 1-10 or Figure 1-11, depending on which hand you use and whether you hold the hook underhand or overhand.

If this feels awkward at first, don't worry. With a little practice, you'll be able to get set up to crochet within seconds, without really thinking about it.

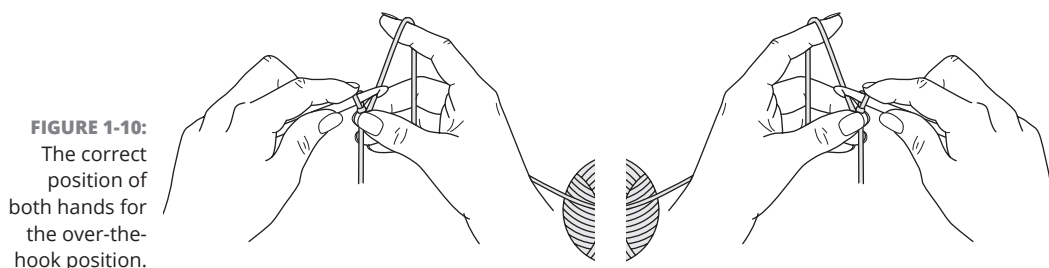


FIGURE 1-10:
The correct position of both hands for the over-the-hook position.

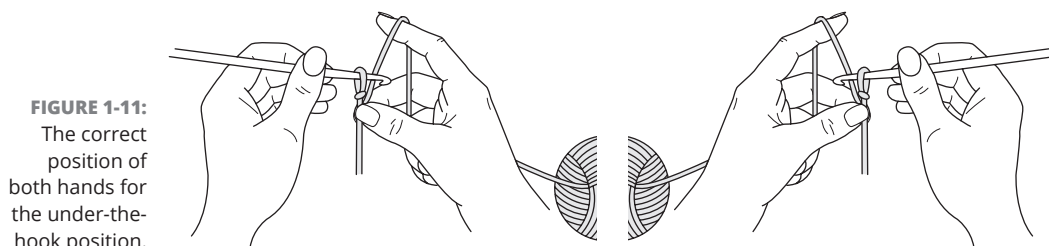


FIGURE 1-11:
The correct position of both hands for the under-the-hook position.

It's in the Bag: Completing Your Crochet Kit

In addition to keeping the work off the couch and out of reach of pets, kids, and accidental spills, the advantages of keeping your yarn, pattern, finished pieces, notions, notes, and work in progress all together are numerous. With a dedicated crochet bag, you can quickly grab your project as you head off for a weekend away, an afternoon at a friend's house, or to a needlework guild meeting.

As simple and inexpensive as a leftover tote bag, or as luxurious as a just-for-crocheters designer bag, a dedicated place to store your project is a practical investment. If you've got multiple projects under way, consider placing each one inside a large freezer storage bag or other clear pouch so you can easily identify which is which.



WARNING

It probably goes without saying that pets love yarn. It's soft, it's squishy, and it sometimes tastes like sheep. Although it may be cute to watch your kitten bat around a ball of yarn, it sets you up for a lifetime of problems when you go to work on your crochet. Much worse than that, even ingesting a few inches of yarn can cause a life-threatening emergency or death. Be safe. Always keep an eye on your yarn and put it well out of reach in a closed crochet bag when you're not around.

Few things are more frustrating than getting ready to finish a project late at night and realizing that you're missing the yarn needle to sew it all together. Putting together a crochet kit, containing some inexpensive but often-used items, can help your projects go a lot more smoothly. Consider purchasing a small, zippered cosmetics pouch or other container to keep everything together and easy to find in your crochet bag.

This list includes a few items that, although not always necessary, are great additions to your crochet kit. You probably already have most of them around the house — just gather them together and put them in a spot with your crochet hooks:

- » **Scissors:** Try to find a small, blunt-nosed but sharp-bladed pair for snipping ends.
- » **Hard ruler:** A 6-inch (or smaller) inflexible ruler is helpful for measuring your gauge.
- » **Fabric tape measure:** Look for a retractable fabric tape measure for keeping track of your progress as you crochet. You also can use this tape measure for taking body measurements when crocheting a sweater, hat, or other garment.
- » **Pins:** Straight pins, such as the type that sewers use, are handy when it comes time to sew your project together.
- » **Removable stitch markers or coil-less safety pins:** Your craft or yarn store sells pouches of plastic stitch markers with an opening on one side. These are designed to go around the stitch itself and be removed easily later. Some crocheters prefer safety pins without the coil on one end. (The coil tends to snag.)



WARNING

Unless you're also a knitter, don't buy the solid stitch markers that are designed to sit on a knitting needle. You'll only have to cut them out of your work later.

- » **Yarn and tapestry needles:** Consider purchasing a range of yarn needles in different sizes for different projects. Because these are small, they'll get lost easily, but you'll need one for weaving your ends and stitching project pieces together.
- » **Pencil and paper:** Keeping track of your pattern progress can be helpful. A small notebook or pad of paper, plus a pencil or pen, makes life easier.