

Threads and Thread Twist: A Few Suggestions

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1. An excellent source of information that compares an extensive array of thread brands, materials they are made from, diameter of each, strength, flat-ability and other important aspects of fly tying threads can be found at Martin Joergensen's website, the Global Fly Fisher under <http://globalflyfisher.com/tie-better/fly-tying-thread-table>
2. Most thread comes off the spool/bobbin already twisted by the manufacturer. This twist for most threads, though not all, is clockwise. (To understand "clockwise," attach thread to a hook held in a vise and allow the bobbin holder to suspend beneath. Look down on the bobbin holder as if looking at the face of a clock.)
3. A simple way to add or remove twist from thread is to simply spin the bobbin holder while the thread is attached to a hook. Some holders tend to wobble, but most, particularly of the Frank Matarelli style, will spin easily. The direction of spin to create additional twist or remove twist will be discussed below.
4. When using a bobbin holder, each wind of thread made around the hook creates a single twist in the thread. If wound in the conventional direction (over the top and back under), a right-handed tier will create a clockwise twist and a left-handed tier will create a counterclockwise twist in the thread. When thread is wound in the unconventional direction (under the hook and back over) the opposite occurs. (Note: With all additional examples below it is assumed that the thread is wound in the conventional direction.)
5. To determine flatness as well as direction of thread twist, with the thread attached to the hook and the bobbin holder suspended below, pinch the thread with a finger against the hook and lift the bobbin holder. If the thread leans to the right, it has a clockwise twist. If it leans left, it is twisted counterclockwise. If it bends up with little or no lean, the thread is flat. By running a thumbnail down the thread, twist can be enhanced for easier visual recognition. If the thread furls (due to a more than a moderate amount of twist) note the direction of twist that the bobbin holder makes when suspended below the hook. If untouched it will spin in an opposite direction to the twist in the thread.
6. A very general rule is that flat thread allows better control and easier capture of materials. When not well understood, twisted thread adds challenge since it tends to kick right or left (depending on twist direction) making material capture more difficult. While a "pinch wrap" or "soft capture" may help to get around the problems created by twisted thread, it misses the opportunity of learning how twist can be used to advantage.
7. Though flat thread is a reasonable approach for capturing materials, there are occasions when clockwise or counterclockwise twist can make it even easier. Once understood, twist can be used to throw the thread to the right (clockwise twist) or to the left (counterclockwise twist) directly over the edge of materials rather than away from them as often times is the case when no consideration of twist has been taken. When misunderstood or not recognized, thread twist can take on a life of its own by kicking the wrong direction, furling the thread, or even twisting around adjacent suspended materials.

8. A foundation of flattened thread can provide a smooth surface while adding friction for material attachment more so than does a bare hook shank. Flat thread can also build a smooth taper for a body or underbody with more control than when attempted with twisted thread.
9. Twisted thread produces even more friction points reducing materials slippage on the hook shank, but it also creates a rough, uneven surface which can prove objectionable when materials such as flat tinsel or floss are wound over the thread. Additionally, an uneven foundation under the wings of a dry fly hackle can force the barbs out of place from what would have been their natural position of truly perpendicular to the hook shank if the wings had been over a flat, smooth surface. This occurs because the feather's rectangular rachis/shaft falls into the uneven surfaces and angles created by twisted thread.
10. Twisted thread is slightly stronger than flat, but twisting too much can break thread.
11. Twisted thread will "cut" (sometimes literally with polyethylene thread) down into materials more than flat given the same amount of pressure.
12. Most threads have some stretch, with nylon having more than others. Stretch has advantages and disadvantages that will be discovered by use, but one thing to consider is that a thread that has more stretch, such as nylon, can influence materials to actually move over time.
13. With twist comes the tendency for thread to migrate. With more twist comes greater migration. A small amount of clockwise twist will mildly lean thread to the right. This becomes more dramatic with additional clockwise twist. An application where this can be useful is when winding a twisted thread rib over the body of a nymph or dry fly. If a right-handed tier twists the ribbing thread clockwise, as the rib is wound, it will naturally migrate toward the hook eye unless forced to do otherwise. The distance between the ribs is determined by the amount of twist. Less twist allows for closer winds. More twist separates the winds further apart.
14. When twisting dubbing onto thread, the right-handed tier should twist the dubbing in a clockwise direction. Remember that every wind of thread around the hook produces a clockwise twist. If the dubbing is twisted onto the thread in a counterclockwise direction, for every wind around the hook the dubbing is losing a twist and will become more loose. If loose dubbing is preferred, then a counterclockwise twist would be useful, but this would not typically be desirable. For the left-handed tier it would be wise to twist the dubbing counterclockwise.
15. Dubbing is generally best applied to flat thread. To avoid unnecessary thread winds (so important on small flies) having dubbing as close to the hook as possible before winding on is usually preferred. Dubbing will slide on flat thread when it is pinched against the edge of your finger held against the thread as long as the thread is not heavily waxed. Twisted thread requires the dubbing to be corkscrewed up the thread, which will loosen the dubbing.
16. When it is desired to mount a material on top of the hook shank, do not pull the thread down. First make one or two winds around the material and then pull up. By doing so the material has less potential to be pulled around the hook and out of position. Pull up to pull down, pull down to pull up, pull toward you to pull into the hook, or pull away to pull into the far side of the hook.