

# BEGINNING FLY TYING

by Michael Abramowitz

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*Preface: The following article was originally published in the February 2014 issue of the Mid Atlantic Fly Fishing Guide. You can find more information about the Mid Atlantic Fly Fishing Guide on their [Facebook](#) page.*

As you all know this magazine, Mid Atlantic Fly Fishing Guide, has many informative articles to guide devotees of this wonderful sport.

In the following article my goal is to guide fly anglers who wish to begin tying their own flies. There are many books, magazines, DVD videos, internet websites, and podcasts related to fly tying. I will use the generic term "fly" and this will apply to all of the imitations insects, and of fish we wish to use to entice fish to strike and get hooked on our fly fishing setup.

The beginners often asked questions are, how do I get started tying flies? What do I need for equipment, where do I obtain the materials, and how do I get the bits and pieces of material on the hook to look like a fly? Many chapters of fishing organizations such as Trout Unlimited, the Federation of Fly Fishers, local sportsmen's clubs, and fly shops have classes and demonstrations at their meetings to tie flies. These are great places to start.

First you will need some equipment. One of the main pieces of equipment is the fly tying vise. This may be the most expensive piece of the equipment you will need. This as the name imply is a gadget to hold the hook while you attach the material to the hook. An often made mistake is starting off with an inferior vise, then later upgrading to a vise better suited to your needs. The better vises are all metal, heavy and durable. Check out reviews on the internet, speak to friends, and visit your local fly shop. You cannot get the feel of a fly tying vise on an internet screen view or video. The fly shop is all hands on and may be demonstrated to you. I suggest a vise that will handle a range of different hook sizes for example from about size large #4 to a small #22 or smaller. There are rotary and non-rotary vises. Buy a good one at the start. You won't regret it.

Beginners tools include a bobbin to hold a thread spool, small scissors, whip finisher to tie a knot when completing the fly, hackle pliers for gripping and rotating material around the hook, a small plier to de-barb the hook (it is unpleasant to hook yourself), a dubbing tool (use a long old fashioned hat pin), and a bobbin threader (you can use a very thin wire strand or monofilament to pull thread through the bobbin).

The most daunting task is selecting the materials you need. A fly pattern refers to the needed materials to tie the fly. There are many types of materials used to tie original flies. There are synthetic materials and fibers. Natural materials cover a wide range of fur and feathers. The feathers are usually from poultry specially bred for color and feather characteristics and game birds such as turkey, ruffed grouse and waterfowl. Sometimes these feathers are color dyed. There are yarns like knitting yarns and sewing threads. Body materials from deer, elk, rabbits, and many other animal sources are also used. The list is extensive.

Wire on small spools and metal beads add weight to subsurface flies. One can use lead wire from a small spool to wrap on a hook to add weight to the fly. Note that lead is banned in some states, such as California.

Hooks can be one of the most confusing things for the new tyer. Fly hooks are referred to by type, size and manufacturer's number. There are dry fly hooks, hooks for subsurface flies, nymphs, and streamers. The components of a hook include length, hook gap, and wire thickness. Do not get overwhelmed and buy many types of hooks. Buy hooks for what you want to start out tying. With time you will get familiar with the choices of hooks.

A thread bobbin holds the thread and helps one to wrap thread around the hook. Thread is designated by type of thread by thickness most often referred to by numbers such as 3/0, 4/0, 8/0 and so on. The lower the number, the heavier the thread. 3/0 thread is thicker and harder to break than 8/0. The term denier is also a reference thread thickness and breaking strength. The lower the number the easier it is to break the thread.

Another question is where and how to set up the fly tying equipment. A frequent contributor to this magazine, A. K. Best, in the February 2006 issue described "The Set Up." Mr. Best described the choice of location, lighting, and how to be comfortable while seated while tying fly. (See also A. K.'s column "Your Tying Room-August 2011 for suggestions on how to set up. Ed.) Arrange your tools and materials so items can be found easily and quickly. Use labeled containers such as plastic boxes, zip lock bags, and craft boxes. Browsing in craft stores may surprise you on what you can find for fly tying.

Now that I have the necessary tools and materials, how do I tie the fly? As I mentioned at the beginning of the article the internet has a multitude of sites on tying the actual fly. Most important is the skill techniques to assemble it all to the fishable fly. Classes and



Basic fly tying tools including bobbins, hair stacker, pliers, whip finisher, dubbing needle, and dubbing twister.

demonstrations is one way. I would suggest a video is the easiest. You set your own timetable, and you can review the video/DVD many times.

For beginners two references will get one well on the way to tie flies to fill your fly box. A. K. Best's "*The Best of A.K. Best - Tying Dry Flies (Tails, Hackles, Wings, Bodies)*" VHS video is a great start. To learn basic techniques Charlie Craven's "*Basic Fly Tying*" book takes you step by step through the process. Both are great for both the beginner and experienced tyer. But these are not the only two references. The number of books and video material available is amazing. There are books just for specific types of flies, be it dry flies, nymphs, midges, streamers, bucktails and so on. The books and videos cover fresh water, salt water, and using specific materials to tie the flies.

Pace yourself when starting out in this new facet of this fabulous sport. Technique will develop with time, practice, and patience. When you catch a fish on the first fly you tied, it will be a memorable experience. Another great pleasure is to get feedback from friends to whom you gave a few flies then you get requests to tie more flies that yielded results that made their day successful on the stream.

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