

How to Speed Up Your Fly Tying

An article by Peter Gibson, New South Wales, Australia

I sometimes hear people say that it can take them 10, even 20 minutes, to tie a fly. Considering the number of times I lose a fly on a bush behind me on the very first back cast, if it took me 20 minutes to make them I would spend most of my fishing days in tears.

There are four likely reasons why it might take you that long to tie a fly. The first is that you might be genuinely "fumble fingered" which I think is pretty unlikely. Most men are quite adept at using tools, fiddling with little mechanical gadgets and so on so there's really no reason why they should be clumsy at fly tying. The second reason could be that you just don't know what you're doing...and the only solution to that is a few good books and plenty of practice. The third reason might be that you're not properly organized and the fourth, and most likely reason, is perhaps you're just trying too hard to tie neat, perfectly proportioned flies.

The cause of the last two problems is that if you pick up a fly tying book, magazine or video, someone is always teaching you how to tie the perfect fly...and a new type of fly at that! That is quite easily understandable as most famous fly tiers want to promote their dazzling skills and techniques and there's probably not much of a market for books on "bad" fly tying. Most magazine articles are about new killer patterns, new materials and new techniques. That's all very well if you are a proficient fly tier, but if you're a slow fly tier, all these new techniques and patterns can be a source of great frustration and what you really need to learn is 'bad' fly tying of familiar patterns.

I started tying flies in 1975, the year after I left school. I was living in a shared house in Canberra with some school mates. Two were in their first year of university and one was working for a concreting company as a Ditch Witch operator. I wasn't working but had just taught myself to tie flies from a Veniard beginner's kit and showed some to a bloke who had just opened a tackle shop in Kingston. He offered to buy as many as I could tie and he would pay me 50 cents per fly.

As I was otherwise unemployed, the economics of this were quite attractive and I was living in a hungry, thirsty household. But living was cheap...Foster's was 28 cents a can! We lived on nothing but beer and tomatoes. Fortunately tomato growing was a bit of hobby for us Cooma boys and before long we had a backyard full of Grosse Lisses, which we ate on Sao biscuits with pepper, salt and sugar. They were probably all that stood between us and scurvy that year.

I didn't need to tie many flies to meet the daily cost of living, but it soon became obvious to me that flies could be tied at a prodigious rate if you were hungry or thirsty enough. If I set my mind to it my daily requirements...indeed the daily requirements of the whole malnourished household...could be met with just a few hours of tying. Well, perhaps not my true daily nutritional requirements but after a few cans of Fosters and half a packet of Saos, I can assure you, it felt like it.

In those blurry, green-thumbed, halcyon days I learned some tricks about tying that they usually don't teach you in books.

It's in your hands!

You can't tie flies quickly with rough skin on your hands and rough nails—the thread and materials snag on the broken skin and cracks. If you tie frequently, or are about to do a week or so of tying leading up to a big trip or a new season, put a good moisturizer on your hands a couple of times a day. The best I've found is Neutrogena 'Norwegian Formula' Hand Cream, which you can get in supermarkets and pharmacies. I keep a tube on my desk and put a pearl sized dab on my hands most days. It's extremely concentrated, non-greasy and makes a noticeable difference to your hands within days. I don't use it all the time, but certainly use it at times of the year when I am doing a bit of tying.

Keep your fingernails slightly longer than usual (so you can pick up materials quickly) and keep them smooth with a nail file.

Nice view!

Even if you don't normally wear glasses, it's worth experimenting with low power magnifying spectacles or reading glasses like the ones you can buy for about \$20 in a pharmacy. I think good glasses and a clear white background behind the vice are even more important than a strong light. The clearer you can see, the quicker you can tie the fly, especially when it comes to finishing the head.

Manage your organization!

I keep all my materials in sets of cheap plastic stacking drawers you can get from places like Officeworks. When I buy new materials such as furs, feathers, etc., I take them out of the original packets and put them into Glad Snap Lock bags, and write the name and colour on the bag. That way, all the bags, being the same size, store easily in the drawers, are easy to open and close, are clearly labelled and are insect proof. There are no cardboard header cards, weird shaped bags, staples and other nonsense to get in the way when I'm searching in the drawers.

I keep all my hooks in big multi-compartment hook storage boxes, made by Umpqua and Tiemco. These are much easier than opening and shutting little plastic boxes every time you are looking for hooks.

I add pest strips to the drawers to deter moths and other bugs.

Running the production line!

This is the most important tip of all! You can't tie flies quickly if you only do one or two of each pattern. Instead, tie a batch of say a dozen of just one pattern in each tying session. You will pick up speed as you go and start to see the tricks of tying that particular pattern. You can also adjust the proportions of the flies as you go...if the first couple look a bit bushy, you can use less material on the next ones. If the eyes are too crowded...you can start building the fly further back down the shank. By the time you've tied four or five they should be starting to look pretty good and the first flies in the batch will still be useful in an emergency, even if they aren't perfect.

Ready, set and go!

Lay out all the materials you need for the batch before you start. For example, if you are tying Red Tags, get out a dozen hooks, select and trim a dozen hackles, pull a dozen peacock herls out of the packet and have a length of red tag wool and a length of ribbing wire handy. Have only the tools and materials for that pattern at hand. Keep everything else out of the way.

Free your mind of clutter!

Only put in your work area the things you need for that batch. Divide the work area into three. If you're right handed put your tools in the area to the right of the vice. The area behind the vice should be clear. The other area, to the left of the vice, is where you put the materials. Don't put your tools and materials in the same place—they tangle when you go to pick them up.

No need for waxing!

It's a waste of time. With a bit of practice and moist hands you will find you don't really need to do it.

You are only as good as your tools!

I don't think you need a fancy vice. They're nice if you afford them, but they don't help you tie faster. However there are a couple of tools that are definitely worth spending a bit of money on.

Bobbin holders with ceramic or titanium tip inserts are fast to use and because they are very smooth they don't break the thread. I prefer short-shafted bobbin holders as they are faster to use than long-shafted bobbin holders. Buy four or five bobbin holders so you aren't always changing thread. I have bobbin holders always set up with black and tan thread for trout flies and black, hot orange, shrimp and chartreuse for salt water flies. I always buy the same brand of thread, Uni-Thread in 3/0 and 6/0, so that I get used to the breaking strain.

For dry flies, rotating hackle pliers are worth their weight in gold. Tiemco and Griffin both make absolute beauties and I highly recommend them. They wind a nice tight, parallel hackle and you get fewer tip breakages and other hackle winding problems that can slow you down.

A whip finisher is a must. They come in several designs, all of which work once you figure them out. I still use the first one I bought in 1975. Buy one, learn how to use it, save a heap of time and tie stronger flies. This is just one of those "must haves".

Good scissors are of course very important. They should be the best quality you can find and have very sharp points. Don't buy very slim, sleek scissors...they are too hard to pick up quickly...scissors are quicker to use if they have fat handles or plastic finger inserts and if they are straight not curved so that it doesn't matter which way you pick them up.

Short and sweet!

The distance between the fly and the bobbin tip should only be an inch or two. Winding the thread is then a quick flick of the wrist. Make that distance too long and you're waving your arm around in the air just to circle the fly. And you can't wind thread accurately on to the fly when the tip of the bobbin is six inches away from the fly.

Loose ends loose time!

When you add materials to the fly, position the materials so that there are no overhanging ends or butts to trim off. The less often you have to pick up scissors to trim those butts and scraps, the quicker you will tie. When you get to the end of the fly and the head is tied off with the whip finisher, instead of picking up scissors to trim the thread, just break it off by hand.

Keep your eyes clear and watch around the bend!

A common fault for novices is over-building the fly by starting the fly too far around the bend and then finishing the head too close to the eye. A fly that is over-built will have insufficient room in the gape of the hook thus reducing its striking ability. In most cases, the body of the fly shouldn't go back any further than level with the point of the hook and the eye should be as clear as possible so you can actually see the eye when you want to knot it to your line. If you keep over-crowding the fly, try starting the body further away from the bend and using less material...or use a bigger hook!

Another common problem for beginners is wings and other materials that won't sit straight on the hook. This is usually because when they set wing materials, etc., onto the top of the hook and allow the thread to push the material around the shank.

To avoid this, you have to get the knack of holding the material...let's say a bunch of wing material for a salt water pattern...pinched between your thumb and forefinger over the top of the hook. Wind the thread up between the thumb and the hook on the near side of the hook, then form a small loop above the material before bringing the thread back down the other side between the hook and your forefinger. Pinch lightly between your thumb and finger to hold everything in place, including the small loose loop over the top, but don't pull tight yet. Now repeat the movements. You should finish up with two little loose loops above the wing material and the wing material, loops of thread and hook all pinched firmly between your fingers.

Now pull the thread tight and the loops should close, bringing an even, circling pressure to the threads around the material and the hook shank. Then, still holding the material in position, do a few more, quick, normal winds to tighten it all up.

The encircling loops should have tightened evenly around the material, pulling it directly down onto the top of the hook instead of skewing it around the shank.

The grand final finish!

Don't get out the head cement bottle at the end of each fly...varnish them all in one go at the end of the session so you are not sitting there waiting for them to dry.

The last wrap on the flies!

At the beginning of this article, I described this as tying "badly". That's probably an exaggeration but to save tying time some of these tips certainly cut a few corners and I wouldn't recommend them if you are tying fancy flies for framing or to enter in a competition. These ideas will help you with the flies you want to use to catch fish!

What's wrong with these techniques? Well, I admit you will get tighter, finer dubbed bodies if you do wax the thread...and you might get a tidier result if you do occasionally pick up the scissors and trim a loose hair or herl occasionally. I've said you should keep the eye clear but the best dry flies are generally those which are tied with perfect, small heads incredibly close to the eye of the hook...sometimes so close that you can't see the eye when looking at the fly from the side! And as for not using cement until the end, I must admit that an occasional drop of cement during construction, especially on salt water flies, makes a stronger fly.

However, when you just need flies to quickly fill your box, and you'd rather be out in the sun fishing than sitting at home under a desk lamp, these short cuts might help you get out on the water sooner.