

Let me explain knitting

Coming around again

Way back when I started this blog, I began by talking about yarnovers. And although I explained then how to do a correct YO for any of the four possible combinations of leading and following stitches, there's an aspect that I left out, so I thought I'd come back and cover it.

In most cases, all YOs are done so that the resulting loop sits in Western orientation, with its right leg in front of the needle. There is a circumstance, however, in which this is not wholly desirable. That circumstance is when a pattern contains pairs of YOs that are intended to be symmetrical, but one YO is preceded by a purl and followed by a knit, while the other is preceded by a knit and followed by a purl. (For purposes of this discussion, I am lumping decreases worked with the yarn in back in with knits, and those worked with yarn in front in with purls.)

In the case of the k-YO-p combination, the knit stitch ends with the yarn in back of the work. It's then taken under the needle to prepare for the YO, over the right needle to form the YO, and under the needle a second time to prepare for the following purl. Of all the YO combinations, this one uses the most yarn, as the yarn makes about 1-1/4 circuits of the needle.

In the case of the p-YO-k combination, by contrast, the purl stitch ends with the yarn already in front, so it's simply taken over the top of the right needle to form the YO, and then it's already in the proper position to form the following knit. This is the shortest of the YO combinations, with the yarn making only about 3/4ths of a circuit of the needle.

The difficulty is apparent: the k-YO-p combination puts quite a bit more yarn into its YO than the p-YO-k combination does, with the result that the hole it forms is perceptibly larger.

The potential solutions are twofold: make the big hole smaller, or make the small hole bigger. In either case, this is done by wrapping one of the YOs in the opposite direction, so that the resulting stitch uses the same amount of yarn as its counterpart. Which you choose to alter is an aesthetic choice for you as the knitter.

If you choose to make small holes, you will wish to alter the k-YO-p combination. After finishing the knit stitch, you will bring the yarn from back to front over the top of the right needle, and then proceed with the purl stitch. Work the p-YO-k combination as you usually would. Both YOs pass over the top of the needle only, and are the same length.

If you choose to make larger holes, you will wish to alter the p-YO-k combination. After finishing the purl stitch, take the yarn under the needle to the back, then bring it back to front over the top of the right needle, and then take it under the needle to the back again, and proceed with the knit stitch. Work the k-YO-p combination as you usually would. Both YOs pass under the needle, over the needle, and under the needle again, and are the same length.

In either case, the altered stitch will sit on the needle in the Eastern orientation, with the right leg behind the needle. On the subsequent row or round, you will need to work this stitch through the back leg to avoid twisting the YO closed; working into the right leg, regardless of whether it's in front of or behind the needle, is the rule to avoid twisted stitches.

Okay, I've done a yarnover. Now what?

Another couple of questions I've been asked a lot relate to what to do with a yarnover on the next row, and particularly what to do when a pattern asks you to drop the yarnovers.

When you come back to a yarnover on the next row, it won't look quite like a normal stitch, because it's not attached to the stitch directly below it. Instead, the front leg of it is attached to the stitch on the right, and the back leg of it is attached to the stitch on the left, which causes it to sit at a pretty sharp angle on the needle. However, if you need to knit or purl it, you do this exactly like you would work a normal stitch -- insert your right needle in the front leg in the appropriate direction, and pull the new stitch through. It's not any different, so don't be going and trying to make it difficult.

What about when you're asked to drop it? How does that work? Again, it's much simpler than it sounds. You can readily identify which stitches were yarnovers by their different appearance, as described above -- a loop of yarn, not attached to the row below, sitting at a sharp angle. When you come to one of them that you've been directed to drop, just push it off the tip of the left needle, and let it go. That's it! Once it's no longer wrapped around the needle, it will just be an extra-long bar between the stitch to its right and the stitch to its left, which produces an elongated stitch. This can be used to beautiful effect in patterns such as seafoam stitch, where multiple yarnovers create drops of different lengths.

Speaking of which, how do you do multiple yarnovers? It's simple; you'll end with the yarn behind the right needle, so simply bring it forward between the needles again, and then flip it over the right needle to the back a second time (or a third, etc., if you're asked to do more than two). There's no need to do a stitch in between; if the pattern wants you to do that, it will say so.

So, um, what's this "yfwd" thing?

A yarnover, or YO, is pretty much an American term. The British term, you may have been told, is "yfwd", or "yarn forward". Right? Well, sort of.

British knitters use yfwd, but they also use three other terms: yrn, yon, and yfrn, standing for "yarn round needle", "yarn over needle", and "yarn forward round needle", respectively.

Shove your bugged-out eyes back where they belong, and calm down; it's not that hard. The four terms basically differentiate between the slightly different steps you do depending on whether your preceding and following stitches are purls or knits, and each of them stands for one of the four possible combinations of that.

Since we broke the YO down in the last post to three steps, two of which may or may not be done, let's refer back to those: step 1 is where you move the yarn forward in preparation for the YO if it's not already there; step 2 is the YO itself, where you flip the yarn over the needle; and step 3 is where you move the yarn forward again if the next stitch needs it to be there. We'll see how each of the Brit terms indicates a different combination of those.

YFWD: This is a YO done between two knit stitches. This is the type you're doing if you follow those bad instructions I referred to in the last post: you bring the yarn forward between the needles, and then when you work the next stitch, since it's a knit, that automatically causes you to bring it over the top of the needle. It's the same as doing steps 1 and 2 of our YO. And if this were the only type of yarnover maneuver that existed, those instructions wouldn't be bad; unfortunately for them, it isn't.

YRN: This is a YO done between two purl stitches. You're starting with the yarn in the front, so you bring it all the way around the needle until it's back in the front again; you're doing steps 2 and 3 of the YO.

YON: This is a YO done after a purl and before a knit. You're starting with the yarn in front, and you want to end with it in back, so you just flip it over the needle; it's step 2 all by itself.

YFRN: This is a YO done after a knit and before a purl. The yarn is brought forward and then brought all the way around the needle until it is forward again; it's steps 1, 2, and 3 of our YO method.

You can see from this how the various names go with the steps that you do, and how they fit with YOs by our method.

Every once in a while, you may encounter a pattern that uses YFWD in a place where it clearly is meant to indicate some type of yarnover, but it's not between two knit stitches. Usually, what this means is that it's an American designer writing for a British publisher, and someone has bulk-substituted YFWD every time the designer wrote YO, without thinking about whether that's the proper type to do in that circumstance. Occasionally, however, this may mean that they want you to bring the yarn forward for some other reason, such as to slip stitches with the yarn in front, so double-check that you understand what you're being asked to do, and then go ahead and do the YO steps that are appropriate if that's what's called for.

YO is for Yarnover

Okay, let's get this thing started. Twice this week I've had knitters tell me that they were scared of yarnovers, and afraid to try any patterns that included them, and I've helped a couple of other people figure out pattern problems that were caused by incorrect yarnovers, so this is plainly a topic on which there's a lot of confusion.

One big source of the confusion is that there are a lot of bad instructions out there. One popular way to tell people to do a yarnover is to tell them to move the yarn to the front, and then from

that position knit the next stitch. This does, in fact, cause a yarnover to happen, but it's a horrible way to teach it.

Why? Well, three reasons. One, it gives the strong impression that knitting the next stitch is part of the yarnover, and this is wrong. Two, it leaves a person with no idea whatever what to do if the stitches before and after are anything other than two knits. And three, it completely glosses over the loop over the needle, which is the very essence of a yarnover.

Can I do better? Yes, I think so.

First, what is a yarnover? It's a simple thing: just a loop of yarn that goes over the right needle. It should be oriented in the same way that other stitches are oriented, which for most people means that it needs to come up the front of the needle first and then down the back. It does not include knitting or doing anything else to the next stitch on the needle, and in fact does not use up a stitch from the previous row at all. It does increase your stitch count for the current row by one, so if you do not want your piece to get wider, you need to balance it with a decrease; if you do want it to get wider, of course, that isn't necessary.

Now that we know what a yarnover is, how do we do it? The yarnover itself is accomplished by simply flipping the yarn over the needle, but there may need to be a step before and/or a step after, depending on what the preceding and following stitches are.

If the preceding stitch is a knit (and for purposes of this, anything that is a variant of a knit, like a k2tog, counts as a knit), you need to move the yarn between the needles to the front, because the yarnover starts with the yarn in front. If the preceding stitch is a purl (or a variant of a purl), then you don't need to do anything, because the yarn is already where you want it.

Once the yarn is in front, just bring it over the top of the right needle to the back. That's your yarnover! Wasn't that easy?

Now, if the following stitch is a purl, you need to move the yarn between the needles again, to the front, so you're ready for that following stitch. If the following stitch is a knit, you don't need to do anything extra, but are ready to work that stitch.

So, three little steps: move the yarn forward *if* it's not already there; flip it over the right needle; move it forward again *if* you need it to be forward for the next stitch. Ta da! And now you know how to do a yarnover, regardless of what the stitches around it are, and without screwing up your stitch counts.