

# ***BASIC FINGERLOOP BRAIDING***

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## Background

Fingerloop braiding is a process through which narrow, strong braids are created without the use of a loom. They are made by passing a number of loops of thread through each other in a predetermined pattern. Most consist of between three and seven loops; more than this number requires the assistance of a second set of hands. A number of braids have been found in excavations in London and been dated to the thirteenth and fourteenth century.

The basic process of fingerloop braiding is to array the loops over the fingers of both hands and pass the bottom-most (pinkie) loop from one hand into the top-most (index) position on the opposite hand. This basic process produces a flat plait that looks much like braided hair. Two other variations will produce a more complex flat braid and a round (or more accurately, square) braid.

## Getting Started

In order to make a fingerloop braid, you need three things: thread/string/yarn, scissors, and an immobile object.

The material you choose to use depends on what you're planning to use the braid for. Thin thread (such as cotton crochet thread or embroidery floss) is consistent with the extant examples, but it's easier to see what you're doing with a heavier thread. Whatever material you use, it should not be stretchy (making acrylic knitting yarn a less-than-ideal choice). I've found that heavy cotton knitting yarn works well for learning. All existing examples of fingerloop braids are worked in silk.

Once you've decided on what thread to use, you need to cut the loops that will make up the braid. Fingerloop braids can be worked by one person with between three and seven loops; odd numbers of loops are easier to keep track of than are even numbers. The length of the loops depends on a couple of factors: first, what the braid will be used for and second, your wingspan, because in order to tighten the braid, you have to be able to separate your hands far enough to pack the shed (in other words, to work the twists you just put into the string to the top of the braid).

Tie the loops together at the top (un-looped end) with an overhand knot. Affix the group of loops to a stationary object such as a piece of furniture. If furniture is not available, your big toe can serve as a good substitute. Once you've got the loops attached to something, you're ready to begin braiding. As you work your braids, you'll probably notice that they get tighter as you get closer to the end; this is an artifact of the process and is found in the medieval examples. When you braid, you should "reverse" the loops – that is, transfer them from one finger to the other such that the side of the loop that was on the bottom ends up on the top after it has been passed to the receiving hand.

## Plaits

To make a plait from five loops, begin with three loops on your left hand (on the index, middle, and ring fingers) and two on your right (on the middle and ring fingers) and follow the steps below.

|  | LEFT HAND                              | RIGHT HAND                               |
|--|--|--|
| Start  | I(ndex) T1<br>M(iddle) T2<br>R(ing) T3 | I(ndex) free<br>M(iddle) T4<br>R(ing) T5 |
| Step 1:<br>Pass T3 to RH I<br>Shift T2 to LH R and T1 to LH M  | I free<br>M T1<br>R T2                 | I T3<br>M T4<br>R T5                     |
| Step 2:<br>Pass T5 to LH I<br>Shift T4 to RH R and T3 to RH M  | I T5<br>M T1<br>R T2                   | I free<br>M T3<br>R T4                   |
| Step 3:<br>Pass T2 to RH I<br>Shift T1 to LH R and T5 to LH M  | I free<br>M T5<br>R T1                 | I T2<br>M T3<br>R T4                     |
| Step 4:<br>Pass T4 to LH I<br>Shift T3 to RH R and T2 to RH M  | I T4<br>M T5<br>R T1                   | I free<br>M T2<br>R T3                   |
| Step 5:<br>Pass T1 to RH I<br>Shift T5 to LH R and T4 to LH M  | I free<br>M T4<br>R T5                 | I T1<br>M T2<br>R T3                     |
| Step 6:<br>Pass T3 to LH I<br>Shift T2 to RH R and T1 to RH M  | I T3<br>M T4<br>R T5                   | I free<br>M T1<br>R T2                   |
| Step 7:<br>Pass T5 to RH I<br>Shift T4 to LH R and T3 to LH M  | I free<br>M T3<br>R T4                 | I T5<br>M T1<br>R T2                     |
| Step 8:<br>Pass T2 to LH I<br>Shift T1 to RH R and T5 to RH M  | I T2<br>M T3<br>R T4                   | I free<br>M T5<br>R T1                   |
| Step 9:<br>Pass T4 to RH I<br>Shift T3 to LH R and T2 to LH M  | I free<br>M T2<br>R T3                 | I T4<br>M T5<br>R T1                     |
| Step 10:<br>Pass T1 to LH I<br>Shift T5 to RH R and T4 to RH M | I T1<br>M T2<br>R T3                   | I free<br>M T4<br>R T5                   |
| Now you're back where you started!                             |  |  |

Continue in this fashion until the braid is as long as you need or until the loops become too small to work with.

## Flat Braids

Flat braids look like plaits on one side and have a more complex pattern on the other. They are worked in the same general manner as plaits, only the loop being passed from one hand to the other goes *through* the top loop on the receiving hand.

|   | LEFT HAND                              | RIGHT HAND                               |
|---|--|--|
| Start   | I(ndex) T1<br>M(iddle) T2<br>R(ing) T3 | I(ndex) free<br>M(iddle) T4<br>R(ing) T5 |
| Step 1:<br>Pass T3 through T4 to RH I<br>Shift T2 to LH R and T1 to LH M  | I free<br>M T1<br>R T2                 | I T3<br>M T4<br>R T5                     |
| Step 2:<br>Pass T5 through T1 to LH I<br>Shift T4 to RH R and T3 to RH M  | I T5<br>M T1<br>R T2                   | I free<br>M T3<br>R T4                   |
| Step 3:<br>Pass T2 through T3 to RH I<br>Shift T1 to LH R and T5 to LH M  | I free<br>M T5<br>R T1                 | I T2<br>M T3<br>R T4                     |
| Step 4:<br>Pass T4 through T5 to LH I<br>Shift T3 to RH R and T2 to RH M  | I T4<br>M T5<br>R T1                   | I free<br>M T2<br>R T3                   |
| Step 5:<br>Pass T1 through T2 to RH I<br>Shift T5 to LH R and T4 to LH M  | I free<br>M T4<br>R T5                 | I T1<br>M T2<br>R T3                     |
| Step 6:<br>Pass T3 through T4 to LH I<br>Shift T2 to RH R and T1 to RH M  | I T3<br>M T4<br>R T5                   | I free<br>M T1<br>R T2                   |
| Step 7:<br>Pass T5 through T1 to RH I<br>Shift T4 to LH R and T3 to LH M  | I free<br>M T3<br>R T4                 | I T5<br>M T1<br>R T2                     |
| Step 8:<br>Pass T2 through T3 to LH I<br>Shift T1 to RH R and T5 to RH M  | I T2<br>M T3<br>R T4                   | I free<br>M T5<br>R T1                   |
| Step 9:<br>Pass T4 through T5 to RH I<br>Shift T3 to LH R and T2 to LH M  | I free<br>M T2<br>R T3                 | I T4<br>M T5<br>R T1                     |
| Step 10:<br>Pass T1 through T2 to LH I<br>Shift T5 to RH R and T4 to RH M | I T1<br>M T2<br>R T3                   | I free<br>M T4<br>R T5                   |
| Now you're back where you started!  |  |  |

Continue in this fashion until the braid is as long as you need or until the loops become too small to work with.

## “Round” Braids

This pattern isn't possible with three loops. When worked with five loops, it produces a round braid. When worked with seven, it produces a wide, flat braid similar to the one produced using the “flat braid” pattern.

|   | LEFT HAND                             | RIGHT HAND                               |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|
| Start   | I(ndex)T1<br>M(iddle) T2<br>R(ing) T3 | I(ndex) free<br>M(iddle) T4<br>R(ing) T5 |
| Step 1:<br>Pass T3 through T4 and T5 to RH I<br>Shift T2 to LH R and T1 to LH M | I free<br>M T1<br>R T2                | I T3<br>M T4<br>R T5                     |
| Step 2:<br>Pass T5 through T1 and T2 to LH I<br>Shift T4 to RH R and T3 to RH M | I T5<br>M T1<br>R T2                  | I free<br>M T3<br>R T4                   |
| Step 3:<br>Pass T2 through T3 and T4 to RH I<br>Shift T1 to LH R and T5 to LH M | I free<br>M T5<br>R T1                | I T2<br>M T3<br>R T4                     |
| Step 4:<br>Pass T4 through T5 and T1 to LH I<br>Shift T3 to RH R and T2 to RH M | I T4<br>M T5<br>R T1                  | I free<br>M T2<br>R T3                   |
| Step 5:<br>Pass T1 through T2 and T3 to RH I<br>Shift T5 to LH R and T4 to LH M | I free<br>M T4<br>R T5                | I T1<br>M T2<br>R T3                     |
| Step 6:<br>Pass T3 through T4 and T5 to LH I<br>Shift T2 to RH R and T1 to RH M | I T3<br>M T4<br>R T5                  | I free<br>M T1<br>R T2                   |
| Step 7:<br>Pass T5 to RH I<br>Shift T4 to LH R and T3 to LH M                   | I free<br>M T3<br>R T4                | I T5<br>M T1<br>R T2                     |
| Step 8:<br>Pass T2 to LH I<br>Shift T1 to RH R and T5 to RH M                   | I T2<br>M T3<br>R T4                  | I free<br>M T5<br>R T1                   |
| Step 9:<br>Pass T4 to RH I<br>Shift T3 to LH R and T2 to LH M                   | I free<br>M T2<br>R T3                | I T4<br>M T5<br>R T1                     |
| Step 10:<br>Pass T1 to LH I<br>Shift T5 to RH R and T4 to RH M                  | I T1<br>M T2<br>R T3                  | I free<br>M T4<br>R T5                   |
| Now you're back where you started!  |                                       |  |

Continue in this fashion until the braid is as long as you need or until the loops become too small to work with.

## Simpler and More Complex Braids

The braids described here can be worked with as few as three loops and as many as you can find people to handle (at a maximum of eight loops for each secondary person and seven for the primary person). Obviously, a three-loop round braid isn't possible because you don't have two loops to pass through. What I call "round" braids are really only round when they're worked with five loops; with more they become wide, flat braids with a more complex pattern than is found in the "flat" braid.

## Patterns

You can achieve interesting and lovely patterns by using different colored threads as you work the braid. Most of the examples found in London appear to have been one color (the dyestuffs have degraded, but the remaining threads are uniformly brown), although one 5-loop piece appears to have been worked in two colors, as two of the threads are one shade of brown and the other three are another shade. Additionally, reliquary pouches found in cathedral treasuries were worked using three and four colors of silk thread. These also in some cases had tassels attached in yet other colors.

The simplest way to achieve different patterns is to use different-colored threads to make the loops. You can experiment with various numbers of differently colored loops and see how the patterns work out. There is one more complex version called a Baston Lace. Directions for this, in modernized English, are as follows:

Take five departed bows [loops], that is to say that one side of each bow be of one color and the other side of another color. Set them on your hand as you did with the round lace, so that the color that is above on the right hand is beneath on the left hand, and the [sic] work in the manner of the round lace (Singman and McLean, p. 133).

In other words, rather than making your loops out of one color, make them out of two (holding them together at the "looped" end with an overhand knot). Set up so that one color is on top on one hand and the other color is on top on the other hand. Then work a round braid. It is especially important in this pattern to remember to reverse the loops, because this is what makes the pattern. I have worked a similar pattern starting with one color on top in both hands.

Happy Braiding! Don't hesitate to experiment with different patterns both in color and in working the braid – you'll be surprised at what you can do!

## Sources

Crowfoot, E., F. Pritchard, et al. (1992). *Textiles and Clothing c. 1150 - c.1450*. London, HMSO.  
Singman, J. L. and W. McLean (1995). *Daily Life in Chaucer's England*. Westport, CT, Greenwood Press.