by Franklin Habit

When I was but a lambkin of a knitter, treading timidly across the time-honored beginner's obstacle course of scarf-then-hat-then-mittens, I had exactly one way of dealing with mistakes: I hoped very much not to make any. We all know how well that works.

I was teaching myself from books. They were not good books. They were flimsy, ugly things, sprinkled with advice as useful and reliable as a kindergartener's schoolyard lecture on How Babies Are Made. Yet they did, in the end, lead me forward from knitting to purling to shaping to binding off.

But knitting isn't always about going forward. It's often, especially if you are me, about going backwards. It's about undoing as much as doing. Yet the books were entirely mum about what do if your mitten went awry, or if you simply didn't like the way part of it was turning out. What did you do then? Grit your teeth and soldier on? Throw it away and take up petit point or archery?

My very first scarf was nine feet of garter stitch, and because I didn't know how to go backwards it varied along its length from about twenty stitches wide to upwards of thirty-four stitches and back down to twenty. Or eighteen. It had accidental yarn overs, unintended passages of stockinette, and a couple of spots where the shedding of bitter tears resulted in felting. It was an unsightly hash; but when it went wrong I had no way of undoing it.

By the time I attempted a hat, I had learned from trial and error how to un-knit, one stitch at a time. It was agonizingly slow, and every stab of the left needle felt like a bully's poke in the chest. At length, it worked. So for years—almost a decade—that was the way I erased mistakes:

Un-knit. Un-knit.

You know what can happen to a mistake-prone knitter like me, who zooms forward but only creeps

Phoca PDF

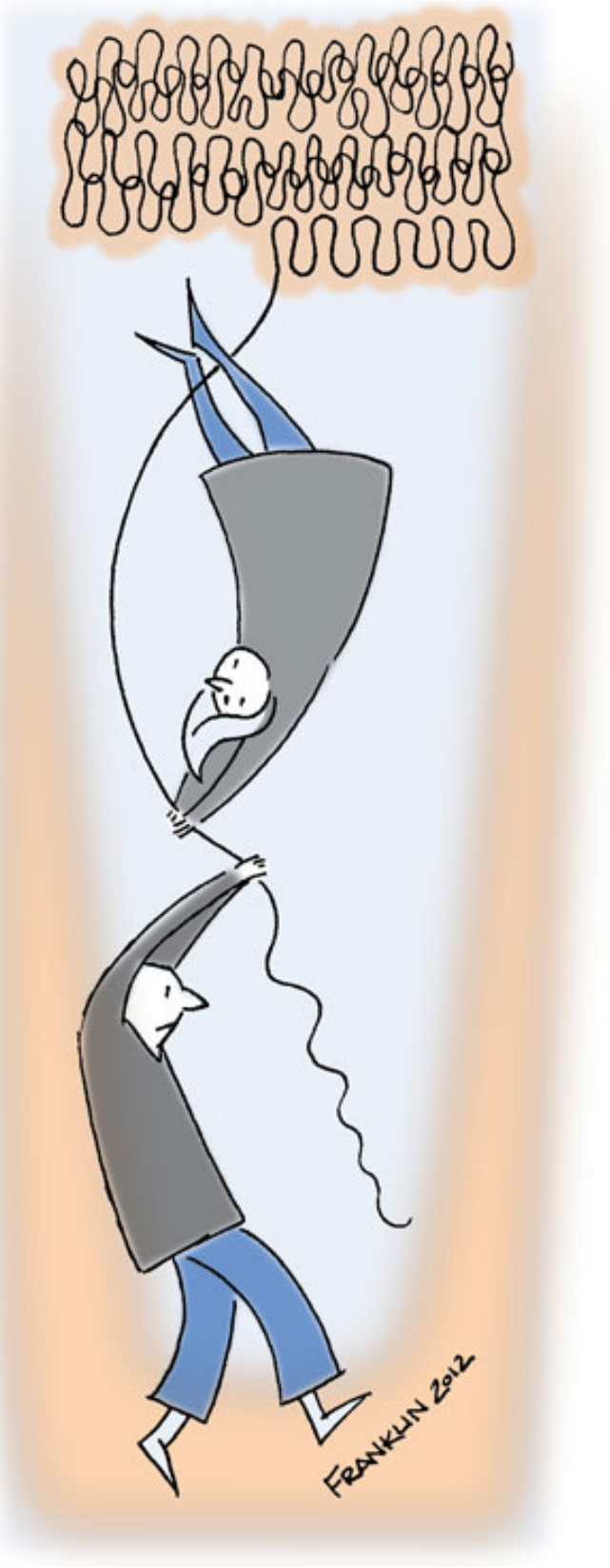
back? He can wind up on the street trailing a snarled skein behind him and mumbling to parking meters about pattern errata, that's what.

It wasn't until I began to meet other knitters that I learned about ripping: the daredevil practice of pulling the needle out of the work *(!)* and tugging on the working yarn *(!!)* and watching as the mistake melted away. And then—this was equally mind-blowing—putting the remaining live stitches back on the needle *(!!!)*.

I confess to feeling a certain amount of irritation at the time that none of the several dozen books I'd studied had ever so much as mentioned ripping back. All those hours—hell, weeks—spent in tediously unpicking yards of fabric a tiny bit at a time, when I could have got it over with in minutes. Perhaps the experts felt it was too much for a beginner to bear. Introductory lessons tend to focus on the joys of knitting; and ripping is not an activity generally accompanied by the interjection, "Wheeeeeeeeeee!"

Even for the highly experienced, it can be fraught with emotion. After all, the universal first step in ripping is deciding whether or not you really, really, really have to.

Phoca PDF


FRANKLIN 2012

This depends, in large part, on your personality. I know knitters—good ones—who insist that if you wouldn't notice the error as it galloped past on a horse it shouldn't bother you. Sounds sensible. Alas, I so seldom observe my knitting as it gallops past on a horse. Usually it just sits there in my lap and mocks me until I rip it.

I canvassed three friends of mine—all professionals with miles of stockinette to their credit—to get a sense of whether I am uniquely neurotic. For once, the answer appears to be no.

"If I discover an error," says designer (and *Twist Collective* regular) Fiona Ellis, "and it's only a couple of rows back, I just pull it off the needles right away and rip. But if it's a long way down, I usually put the work down and have a night's sleep, to see if I can live with the mistake. Usually, I can't. I might try a couple of fixes first…but usually, I rip."

Patty Lyons, who as a busy teacher and commander-in-chief of the Lion Brand Yarns flagship store in New York City has seen an awful lot of mistakes, bases her decision partly on how clear the nature of the problem is.

"You rip," she says, "when you can see exactly where things went wrong. You un-knit when you don't quite know, so you explore stitch by stitch. Think of it this way: There are certain times in your life when you know exactly what you'd like to undo—like letting your roommate's boyfriend move in with you. And there are times when you're not sure what caused you to end up where you are—like why, ten years later, are you still working at your father's insurance agency instead of writing your novel? That's the difference."

Carol Sulcoski, author of the recently published *Sock Yarn Studio* (Lark Crafts), draws a line between public knitting (for design samples) and private knitting. The former gets ripped if it's less than perfect. The latter, not necessarily. "If it's not extremely visible and won't affect the structure, pattern, or finishing of the garment," she says, "and it's the kind of thing nobody except a knitter with a magnifying glass will notice, I'll leave it or fudge it."

She was, in fact, very philosophical about the whole concept of ripping. "It's frustrating, but I try to look at is part of the larger process, not a waste of time. It can help me to learn new things—and it nearly always ends up producing a better result. I remind myself of that a lot."

I'll try to adopt Carol's point-of-view the next time I have to rip. Which is probably any minute now.

Phoca PDF