

# A DOZEN TRUTHS

*for New Woodturners*  
Kurt Hertzog

When learning the ins and outs of woodturning (or any new skill, for that matter), you might find yourself limited by preconceived notions, half-truths, myths, or misconceptions. I've compiled twelve truths that I think every new turner should understand to get started on sound footing.

*Photos by Kurt Hertzog, unless otherwise noted.*

## 1 SAFETY IS ALWAYS A WORTHWHILE ROUTINE.

Never forego safety practices for the sake of convenience, image, or complacency.

Woodturning is unique among the woodworking crafts in that the cutting edge isn't under power—the work is under power, being rotated, and

you present the cutting edge, which is pointing away from you, to it. But don't let that make you complacent about safety; any powered machine can become dangerous in an instant. A stray piece of clothing or hair can become the mechanism to drag you into danger without notice. Of course, lathe tools are sharp and always capable of causing injury.

Inhaling dust and debris from turning and sanding may not seem detrimental, but the cumulative effect can be debilitating. Consider both the immediate dangers and the long-term ones.

There is no reason *not* to practice safe turning at all times. Protective equipment for your skin, eyes, face, and lungs is *always* in order. Protecting not only yourself, but anyone else in close proximity isn't being chicken or overly cautious—it is being smart and responsible.

## JOURNAL ARCHIVE CONNECTION

The AAW's online archives offer plenty of safety resources included in your AAW membership. See, for example, the *Safety Guidebook for Woodturners* (a special digital publication); Hilda V. Carpenter's 2012 *AW* article, "On the Edge of Disaster: Safety in Woodturning" (vol 27, no 4, page 16); and John Kelsey's 2013 *AW* article, "Woodturning Safely: Internalize a Safety Point of View" (vol 28, no 1, page 20). Find these resources and more at [woodturner.org](http://woodturner.org).



## 2 ABILITY IS NOT DEFINED OR LIMITED BY AGE OR GENDER.

One of the joys of woodturning is that it is open to all.



Photo: Andi Wolfe  
Sally Ault instructs a blind turner during the 2017 AAW Symposium, Kansas City, Missouri. Woodturning has no age or gender favorites. Everyone is capable of learning and enjoying.

Regardless of whether you start as a youngster or a retiree, you'll have the same opportunities to learn and grow your skills in woodturning. Recently, manufacturers have offered lathes that are more suitable to turners with physical limitations. Tool-handling can be accomplished in various creative ways. There are turners with vision problems, missing limbs, or other challenges.

In prior decades, high school education was slanted, steering most boys to woodshop and most girls to home economics. Given cultural expectations, more men gravitated to woodturning than women. But traditional gender roles are constantly being challenged, and as people are drawn to woodturning, there are many new turners, both men and women. Capabilities are ultimately defined by training and practice—not by gender expectations.

Regardless of your background, starting point, gender, or existing challenges, you can succeed. Woodturning skills and abilities have never been predetermined by age or gender.

### 3 SANDPAPER IS A CUTTING TOOL.

Even the best turners use abrasives, so don't get hung up on the false stigma of "needing to use" sandpaper.

Sandpaper is indeed a cutting tool—not one that will cover up poor turning or perform significant shaping, but one that is meant to transition curves together smoothly and prepare the surface for applying a finish. Start as coarse as necessary. Don't be tempted to brag about starting at some finer grit. When sanding, slow the lathe down. If your fingers get hot, you are turning too fast. Think of the cabinetmaker, sanding with the wood not moving. Once the starting grit is completed, use a paper towel to clean off the debris. This insures that any abrasive that may have separated from the paper is gone before you start the next finer grit.

As a cutting tool, sandpaper can be sharp or dull (new or worn). Since you cannot sharpen sandpaper like you can a steel tool, throw it away as soon as it is spent. Loaded and/or worn sandpaper doesn't cut wood, it burnishes it. Follow Vic Wood's advice: "Use sandpaper like someone else is paying for it."



If your hand becomes uncomfortably warm from applying sanding pressure, you are turning too fast and not letting the abrasive do the work. Light pressure and slow speeds are the way to go.

### 4 NOBODY WILL KNOW IF YOU USED A SKEW.

Properly turned and well-finished turnings tell no secrets.

When you think of your end audience, or customer, is he or she buying the knowledge of which tool you used to get to the finished turning? Do they really care? If you use a spindle gouge to roll beads or make pommel cuts, nobody will know if you don't tell them.

The skew is a wonderful tool and well worth mastering. It excels at some cuts and performs many that other tools do, too. That said, the skew is a higher-risk tool in certain applications. Skew catches are usually ruinous for the work, with spiraling lines and ugly gouges on the surface. Many times, the work is not recoverable. If you are in business, you may have lost valuable stock and the time you have invested.

I am not suggesting you shouldn't learn the skew, but on projects that count, use the tool best suited to the task and which you can handle successfully. Don't be tempted to use a tool with which you are not proficient just for bragging rights. ▶

#### JOURNAL ARCHIVE CONNECTION

Learn more about the skew chisel by checking out these AAW resources online: Jim Scarsella's and Keith Tompkin's 2015 AAW articles, "Build Your Skills by Understanding the Skew" and "Skew Chisel Primer: Learn the Basic Cuts" (vol 30, no 2, pages 28 and 32, respectively).



## 5 THERE IS NO SHAME IN JUST PRACTICING.

Every endeavor has a learning curve—practice, practice, practice.

No one starts out being an expert at what he/she does. Learning requires an understanding of the basics and then practicing them until they become second nature. At the lathe, the ability to think of the curve you want and have the muscle memory to execute it without worrying about the minute details is the goal. Like practicing the scales on a musical instrument, practicing the various lathe cuts with each of the tools in your kit will pay dividends. Not only will you become more proficient and confident, you will also speed your throughput, reduce sanding, and probably enjoy turning more.

So spend time at the lathe just practicing and not necessarily striving for a finished, presentable product. Each and every tool you use has an application. It performs one or more cuts superbly or it wouldn't exist. The kit in its entirety will let you do almost anything, once you master the tools. If you try to practice while you are creating something, you tend to focus on being successful, rather than on skill-building.

## 6 SHARPENING IS WORTH EVERY MOMENT YOU SPEND ON IT.

Sharp tools provide better results more quickly and more safely.

Like tuning a guitar before playing it, you must “tune,” or prepare, your cutting tools for optimal performance in order to master their use. From the retailer, lathe tools are rarely at the correct grind angle or sharp. You immediately need to get to the grinder to create the proper angle and shape. Without a sharp tool, newcomers will tend to make every tool a scraper. They'll lift the tool handle and increase the clearance angle until something happens. It makes every cutter a scraper and generates dust rather than curls.

A functional sharpening system is required on day one. If you have a lathe and tools without a sharpening system available, you aren't ready to turn yet.

Sharpening, like turning skills, isn't a natural trait. It will take learning and practice. The time you spend perfecting your sharpening skills will be time well spent. Eventually, you'll be able to sharpen your tools quickly and efficiently. Once sharpening becomes easy, you'll do it often and never wait for a tool to become very dull. Touching up a tool edge is far easier and quicker than fully sharpening a dull tool.

## 7 PROJECTS NEEDN'T BE COMPLETED IN ONE SESSION.

Always expecting a finished project after just one turning session can shortchange results.

Woodturners are unique in the world of woodworking. Rarely can a woodworking project like a piece of furniture or cabinetry be completed in one session. For the woodturner, it is often expected. Perhaps the immediate gratification is what draws people to our craft, but this expediency can also leave creativity on the back burner.

Consider that woodworkers often divide their project time into thirds: one-third for project creation, one-third for sanding/prep for finish, and one-third for finishing and final touches. Losing the need to finish everything in one go, you won't need to hurry sanding and skimp on finishing prep. You'll also be able to inspect the work carefully and go back to fix problems. Removing the impulse to hurry, you can also evolve from quick finishes, such as friction polish, to the wider spectrum of slower-curing but more durable finishes, like varnish. You can also revisit form and creative ideas.

### JOURNAL ARCHIVE CONNECTION

Learn how to practice at the lathe effectively. See Kip Christensen's 2017 *AW* article and accompanying video, “The Scales and Chords of Spindle Turning” (vol 32, no 1, page 14). Visit [woodturner.org](http://woodturner.org).



Sharpening skills will make your turning far more effective and enjoyable. It only takes moments to perform. Develop the skills in sharpening along with your turning.

## 8

**ATTENTION TO DETAIL  
PAYS DIVIDENDS.**

Attention to detail doesn't always take long—just a few extra moments to get a better fit and finish, for example.

Paying attention to detail will raise the level of your work.

Whether you are a hobby turner or a professional, your turning projects are likely to be judged in some manner—if not in a competition, then maybe as a measure of your competence or as a comparison of asking price to perceived value. A surefire way to improve overall results is to spend the extra time and care on the finer details. This can be as simple as grain orientation in a bowl to achieve the best visual end result. One detail always worth considering is preparation for finish; that errant scratch you missed during the sanding process will certainly get highlighted under the final finish.

As your skills improve and your audience changes, the scrutiny of results increases and attention to detail will only become more important. Turning structural chair parts without care as to straightness of grain and orientation is a future failure. Overheating a sensitive species during sanding is a future crack development. Lack of

care during sanding erases crisp details. Selection of species for a project is an important factor, as is the actual selection of the blank. All of the materials may look the same, but paying attention to the differences in stock can lead to better results.

Make paying attention to detail a habit. It costs nothing and yields huge results.

## 9

**PROBLEM-SOLVING IS  
REWARDING IN AND OF ITSELF.**

Often satisfaction comes not from the finished product, but from problems solved along the way.

Don't let problems that arise derail your woodturning. You'll experience challenges at every stage of your woodturning career, and they are best seen as learning opportunities. These can be as simple as a wood species that doesn't turn well, even when you follow the "rules." Sometimes, breaking with convention can solve the problem of a troublesome workpiece. Every species can have some peculiarity that you'll need to address, and when you do,



Work-holding challenges often require creative solutions. Through experience, you'll develop a useful bag of tricks, like custom jam-chucking, friction-fitting, taping, hot-melt gluing, vacuum-chucking, etc. Problem-solving brings enjoyment to the journey.

you'll know a little more for next time.

Work-holding will always offer chances to solve problems. There is a way to safely hold just about anything on the lathe. The keyword is *safely*. Sometimes it takes special jigs, chucks, adapters, fasteners, adhesives, and more. Get creative. Solving the problem shouldn't be viewed as an obstacle, but rather as the fun of learning. Much of your growth as a turner is how you embrace these challenges and add skills to your repertoire by doing so.

Challenges are not only at the lathe. The workshop can present problems needing attention. For example, dust extraction and compressed air routing for availability in the shop can be rewarding puzzles to solve. Of course, storage for tools, equipment, finishes, and wood is always in need of some creativity. As your woodturning skills progress and the woodturning portions of a project become easier, ancillary problem-solving tasks will be a refreshing departure from chip-making.

## 10

**YOU'LL NEVER KNOW IT ALL,  
SO KEEP AN OPEN MIND.**

One of the joys of woodturning is that the learning never ends.

Regardless of how long you've been at it or how proficient you've become, there is always something else to learn or explore. Many people specialize by turning mainly bowls or pens or lidded boxes. Every type of woodturning has its own techniques and tricks. If you ever get to the point where you feel bored because you've "mastered" woodturning, branch out ▶



One of the most rewarding aspects of woodturning is sharing it with others. In doing so, you'll continue to learn, too.

into a different facet of turning. Try your hand at various embellishing techniques or a completely different form.

Part of the joy of woodturning is the continual learning process, made easy with books, videos, live demonstrations, and classes. Video in particular is a rapidly expanding medium on the Internet. But be certain to verify the quality and safety being conveyed in online videos, many of which blatantly show unsafe practices. AAW's VideoSource vets online videos for you, so you can trust the content of videos included there. Visit [tiny.cc/AAWVideoSource](http://tiny.cc/AAWVideoSource) to check it out.

Another way to keep learning is to teach, a rewarding challenge that will expand your own skills as well as those of your students.

## 11 MISTAKES AND FAILURES CAN TEACH YOU WELL.

Embrace your mistakes and fumbles—determine what went wrong.

As you progress in woodturning, you will likely take on new challenges that require more time and skill. With complexity comes the greater likelihood of complications, mistakes, and mishaps. Multi-piece assemblies, inserted and friction-fit parts, complicated base material glue-ups, and more will present occasional failure, sometimes due to an error on your part and sometimes not.

Wood, a natural and organic material, is fraught with potential issues. Material flaws that become evident or problematic during a project can be design opportunities. Everyone makes mistakes, and things happen—accept this fact and live with the vagaries of working with something that grows rather than is manufactured.

From a more philosophical perspective, if you are succeeding at your turning projects 100 percent of the time, you probably aren't stretching your abilities. Taking risks in the form of new processes and techniques (always done safely) will expand your skillset. You can also take risks in the form of project design, which might ultimately fail but show you what's next.



When you've had an unrecoverable error, pitch the flawed materials. Don't throw good money after bad.

## 12 THE MAGIC ISN'T IN THE TOOL.

Contrary to the woodturners' joke that you are only "one tool away from greatness," acquiring that brand new tool will probably not solve your turning challenges.

You'll ultimately accept the fact that the magic isn't in the tool—it's in the turner. I know that having the latest and greatest offering in your kit can be part of the fun of woodturning. There is plenty to choose from in the way of tools and equipment, some of which is quite impressive. Manufacturers strive to offer what will sell, with continual improvement in design and materials. Those innovations can certainly help but won't replace solid learning and practice on your part.

Mostly, sharp tools, good technique, and creative ideas are behind the best woodturning. No one ever played Carnegie Hall by buying a fancy piano. They got there by mastering their skills and being able to exhibit their mastery using any piano. ■

*Kurt Hertzog is a past president of the AAW, past chairman of the Rochester Woodworkers Society, and a council member of the Pen Makers Guild. He has written about woodturning and woodworking extensively for various publications, including Woodturning and Woodturning Design, where he published a long-running penmaking column. You can find all of these and many additional unpublished articles at [kurthertzog.com](http://kurthertzog.com).*