Unfabricate
Official Handbook

Why?

"Unfabricate" began partly as academic research and partly as personal investigation. Rather than an online tutorial, I wanted to make a zine to share what I learned about unravelling garments into yarn. There's something terrifyingly intimate about handing someone paper.

I want you to use this zine as a handbook to guide your own exploration. If you have a few bucks, go to your local thrift store and start right there with the "Choosing a Garment" section. Great for rainy days.

You might see unravelling as a "green" action. And indeed, if more of our things were recycled and reused, the world wouldn't have to deal with so much textile, electronic, and other waste. I think it's also an action that connects you to history. Unravelled yarn comes out squiggly, holding the shape of its past stitches. I find that reclaimed materials, like unravelled yarns, have deep stories about the way they were made, how they were used, and who used them.

Let's get unravelling.

Contents

Process

Choosing a garment

Knits vs. Wovens

In the textiles world, you'll mostly see two major kinds of fabric made of yarn: knitted fabric, and woven fabric. You want to choose a knit fabric to unravel. Wovens are generally cut many times while making a garment, so if you try to unravel a woven, you'll just get lots of short pieces of yarn. Knits, on the other hand, often have shaped pieces made from one long yarn.
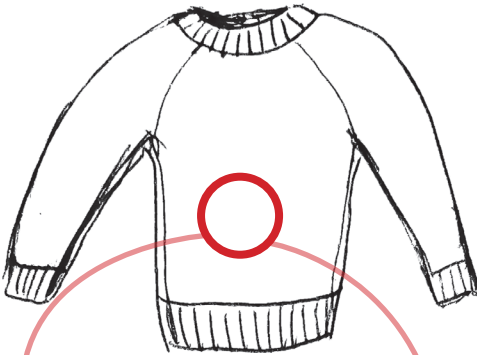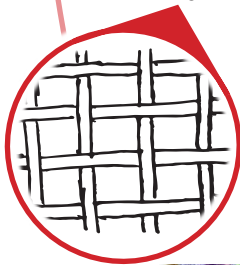
WOVEN

A **woven** fabric will look kind of like a grid up close.

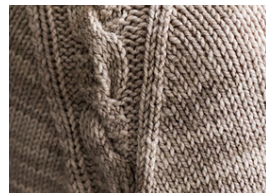If you look even closer, you'll see that wovens are made of yarns crossing at right angles.
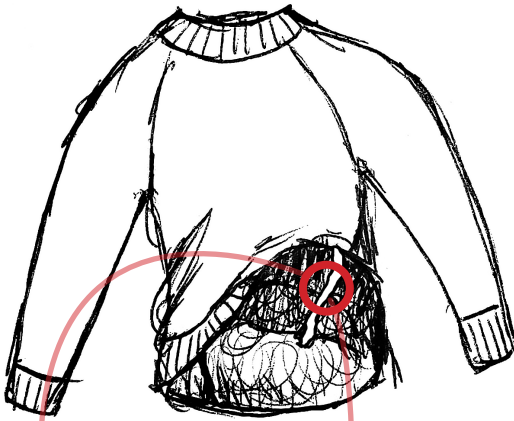
KNIT

A **knit** fabric will look like a bunch of tiny V's or bumps depending on which side you're viewing.

Looking even closer, you see that knits are made of interlocking loops. The fabric is actually one big slipknot, which is why more knits can be unravelled..
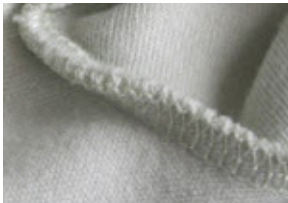
Choosing a garment

Seams & Selvedges

Not all knits will be good for unravelling. Once you've identified a knit garment, check the seams.
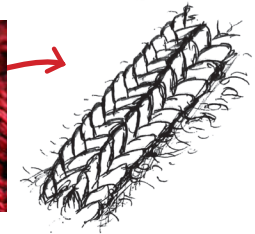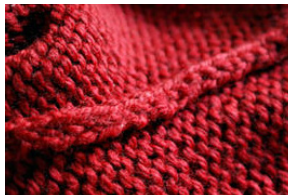
Look on the inside of the garment at the side seams. What do they look like?

✘ NO!

These seams were **serged.** Serging machines cut the fabric as they join pieces, which means that a garment with serged seams will unravel into many short pieces of yarn.

✔ YES! GOOD!

These seams were not cut. You can see the edges of the pieces forming clear ridges (no fuzz) or **selvedges** ("self-edges") at the join. In most commercially-produced garments, the seams are **linked**. Look closely under the seam ridge and you might see a chain or line of V's (top photo). That's a linked seam, which makes unravelling even nicer.

Separating the pieces

Use a small pair of scissors (nail scissors/cuticle trimmers work great) to pick apart the seams. If you have a chain seam (most commercially-produced garments do), you'll see that you're able to "unzip" the entire seam pretty easily.

Why it works

Chain seams are also known as "linked seams" because the machine used to make them is a linking machine. I've zoomed in very closely on a linked seam, showing the chain structure made from a continuous piece of yarn. Like the rest of the knit, it is also a giant slipknot that will come out if you pull on the right end!
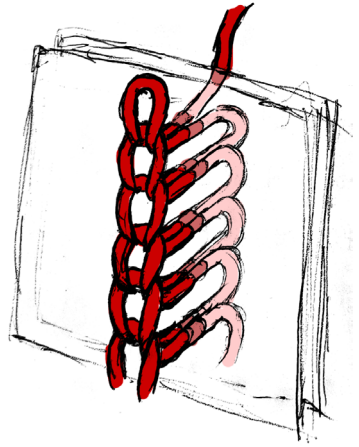
The Pieces

Most sweaters will break down into a standard set of pieces: two sleeves, a front, a back, and possibly a collar.
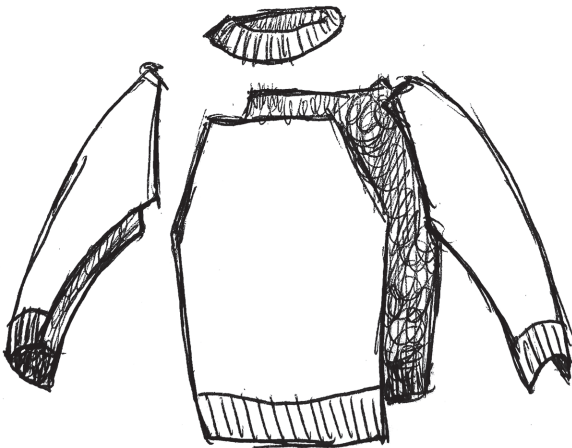
Unravelling

Start at the End

Like all of the previous steps, paying attention to how the pieces were made will help you unravel more easily.

The ribbing of the knit (usually at the cuffs and bottom hem) will tell you where the knitting started. If the V's of the ribbing open up towards the neck and shoulders of the garment, then the piece was started at the bottom of the piece. Start at the end instead, and cut into the top edge of the piece.
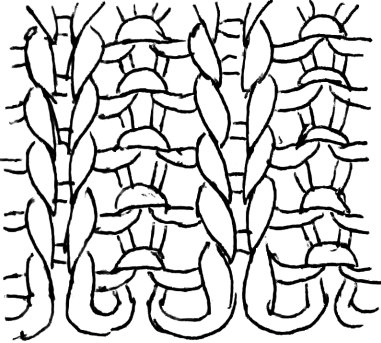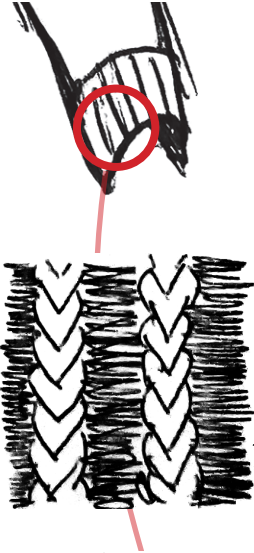
Managing Tangles

As you unravel, wind your yarn carefully to avoid tangles. For a no-tool approach, wind around your hand in a figure 8 pattern (below), and then loosely into a ball..
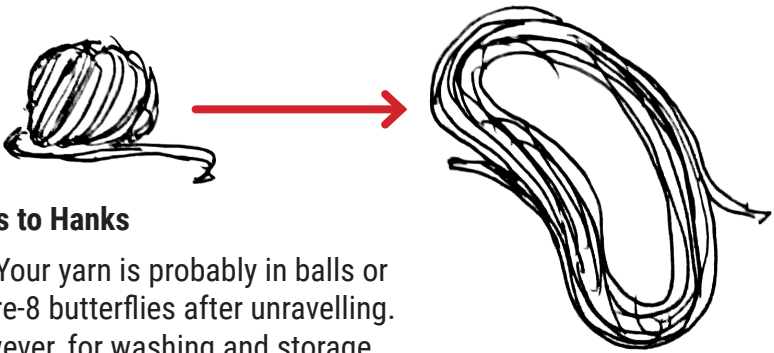
SAVE TIME!

A ball winder will save you time and wrist pain. But at a higher monetary cost.

Winding

Balls to Hanks

Your yarn is probably in balls or figure-8 butterflies after unravelling. However, for washing and storage, yarn is best put up into **hanks** or skeins, which are loose loops. You can wind the yarn loosely and evenly around any two stationary points to make a hank. Some helpful everyday objects: your knees, the backs of two chairs, or two pegs. You can also grab a friendly human to hold out their hands.
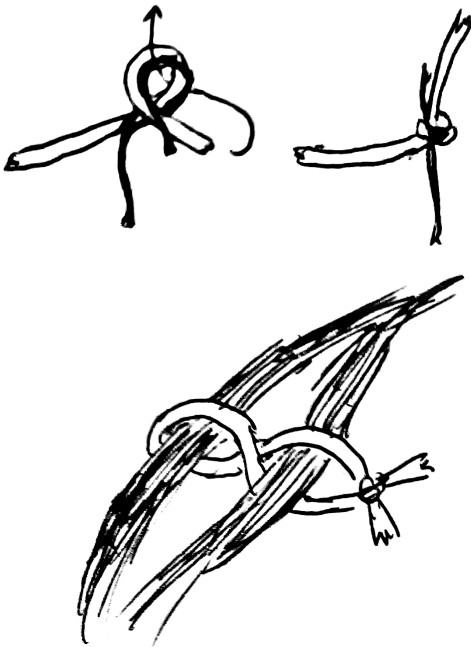
Securing the Hanks

Find some pieces of twine or scrap yarn about as long as your hand. Tie each end of the hank in an overhand knot with one piece of scrap yarn, then tie across the hank in a figure 8 knot, as the bottom picture shows.

Tie figure 8 knots one or two more times around the hank to fully secure it.

Washing

Wash the hanks by finding a small tub (or plugged sink). Soak in cold water with soap or laundry detergent to gently remove the dust and dirt. Rinse the hanks and squeeze (don't wring) most of the water out. To finish drying the skeins and to remove some of the kinks, we'll borrow a couple of techniques from handspinning. Choose one.

Fragile Yarns
If your yarn seems especially fragile and delicate, simply hang the hank to dry.

Snapping
This technique is slightly more gentle on the yarns. Snap the hank back and forth between your wrists a few times to remove water, then hang to dry.

Thwacking
This technique is harsher on the yarns, but much more cathartic if your yarn can take it. Lay a towel on the floor or take one outside to drape over a railing. Hold one end of the hank and swing in a wide arc onto the towel. Move your hand to a different part of the hank, repeat. Thwack two or three times, or to your heart's content. Hang to finish drying.
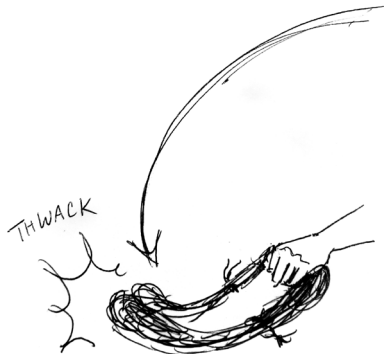
What was the story that your chosen garment told you as you unravelled it?

What story will you tell with this yarn?