

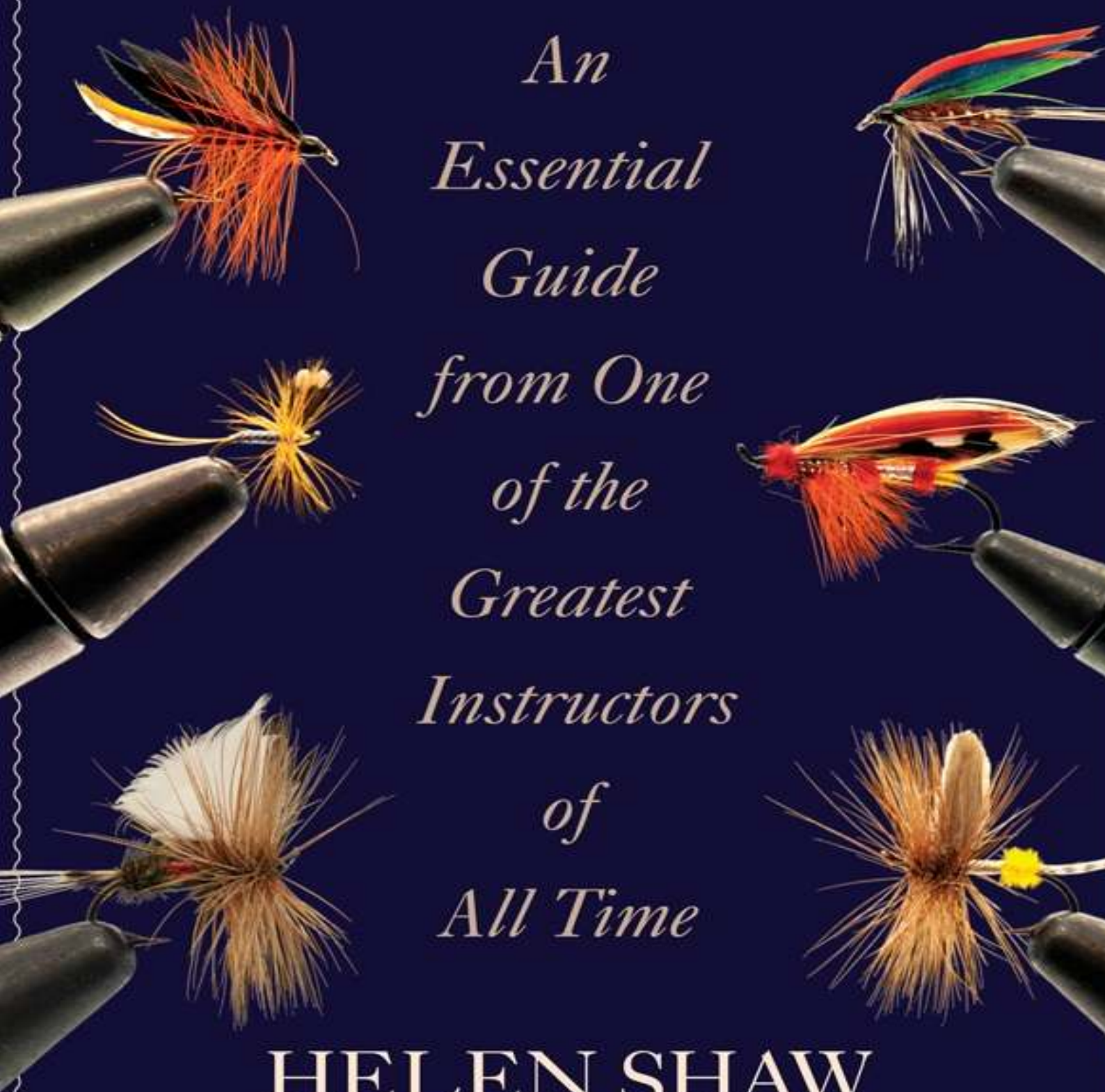
"A master fly-tyer." —*The New York Times*

# FLY-TYING

*An  
Essential  
Guide  
from One  
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Greatest  
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of  
All Time*

HELEN SHAW

Foreword by DAVID KLAUSMEYER



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Skyhorse Publishing

Sincere thanks to Yoshi Akiyama and the American Museum of Fly Fishing in Manchester, Vermont, for providing the photographs placed  
at the center of this edition.

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## Metric Equivalents

*1 inch = 2.54 centimeters*

*12 inches = 0.3048 meters*

*1 ounce = 28.35 grams*

# Foreword to the 2014 Edition

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We all enjoy learning about the latest flies and tying methods, but regardless of our desire to discover what's new, we must remember that when we tie flies, we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us.

After several centuries, tying flies still requires hooks and thread and a collection of feathers, fur, tinsels—and, today, maybe some plastic stuff. We still wrap the thread around the hooks and apply our materials in a thoughtful way to create flies we think will catch fish. There's nothing new about this.

If you visit many waters or fly shops, there's little argument that far more men than women enjoy fly fishing. Curiously, the impact of women on the sport outweighs their small number, and they have always been at the vanguard of what is fresh and exciting in fishing and tying. Many of their contributions have become timeless.

In 1496, Dame Juliana Berners published *A Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an Angle*, which is generally accepted as the earliest volume dedicated to sport fishing. In her book, Dame Juliana describes a collection of flies that would catch fish today, and anglers are still curious about her and those patterns. And in 1892, Mary Orvis Marbury published an extensive collection of letters and illustrations of fly patterns in her groundbreaking book, *Favorite Flies and Their Histories*. The patterns that appeared in *Favorite Flies* were framed and displayed at the historic World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Even today, more than one hundred years after its publication, tyers pour through *Favorite Flies* to study the illustrations and dress the classic patterns. In more recent years, Joan Wulff, Cathy Beck, Gretchen Beatty, and Sharon E. Wright have made serious contributions to the literature on casting, fishing, and fly-tying.

Much has been written about the flies and tying methods of talented women such as Winnie and Mary Dette, Elsie Darby, and Carrie Stevens; their contributions continue to influence the way we tie flies. We should not forget that commercial fly-tying companies have always employed women to produce the patterns they sell; without these carefully constructed flies, many men would have nothing to tie to the ends of their leaders.

Helen Shaw is another talented female flyfisher who made important contributions to fly-tying. Born in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1910, her family moved to the small city of Sheboygan, on Lake Michigan, when she was a young girl. According to legend, Helen saw her first trout when she was a mere three years old. Helen's father taught her how to fish, and she began tying flies when she was young; little did she know the seeds were being planted for her lifelong association with fly fishing and tying.

Art Kade, the owner of Art Kade Flycrafters, met and hired Helen to tie flies for his business in Sheboygan. The shop, located above a candy store, offered lines, leaders, fly boxes, nets, and of course flies dressed on the premises. According to the Art Kade Flycrafters catalog, "Art Kade flies are 'Made in America,' all in our own shop. They are not 'production line gadgets' knocked out to sell at a price but are created with the utmost care for discriminating anglers who appreciate a truly fine fly." There is a photo of Helen with Art, dated June 1942, which was taken in Kade's shop. In the photo, he is examining feathers, and she, wearing a dress and what appear to be pearls, is tying a fly.

There's a good chance that the fly-tying story of Helen Shaw would have ended there—a talented, unsung tyer busily crafting flies for a regional sports shop. But sometime around 1950, Hermann Kessler, who was the art director at *Field & Stream* magazine, visited Wisconsin to fish. While in Milwaukee, Kessler stayed with one of Helen's friends, and the two met. They married in 1953, and Helen left Wisconsin to join Hermann in New York City. Helen continued tying flies, and she quickly built



devoted clientele, especially among the members of the prestigious Anglers Club of New York. Her patterns also gained notoriety through publications such as *Field & Stream*.

Helen and Hermann were an obvious team: she, the talented tyer; he, a knowledgeable photographer and designer. In 1963, they collaborated to produce the groundbreaking book, *Fly-Tying*. At that time there were few good sources of information about how to tie flies, and most of the fly-tying books that did exist were poorly illustrated. What Helen and Hermann did was new and exciting; they raised the standard for fly-tying instruction, and *Fly-Tying* made Helen Shaw a fly-fishing celebrity.

*Fly-Tying* is as important and useful today as it was when it first appeared more than fifty years ago. Helen lays out her method for understanding fly-tying materials and tools and shows how to tie a fly box full of fish-catching patterns. Whether you are new to fly-tying or have been at it for many years, Helen Shaw's *Fly-Tying* has much to offer. Read it, and you will tie better flies.

I met Helen Shaw only once. It was many years ago at a dinner at the American Museum of Natural History. Fishing; her husband, Hermann, played a central role in founding that institution. Helen was wonderfully kind and gracious that evening. We chatted for a few minutes, and then parted—a chance but memorable meeting. Sadly, Helen passed away in 2007, but she remains one of the great ladies of fly fishing.

—DAVID KLAUSMEYER NOVEMBER 2011

# Preface to the 1987 Edition

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When *Fly-Tying* appeared more than two decades ago, it was the first book on the subject to show the tyer's hands at work, from the fly tyer's side of the vise. The method of taking these life-size photographs—seemingly through the eyes of the tyer—was conceived by Hermann Kessler, then Art Director of *Fish & Stream Magazine*. This concept enables novice tyers to relate their hands with mine in the photographs, as they follow the simple instructions beneath each one.

So successful and logical was this presentation that since then his photographic technique has been adopted by many other authors in books and magazine articles. Clearer than drawings, this method has enabled many people to learn to bind materials to a hook (the very foundation of tying flies), as though through personal instruction. Requests for the book came from countries as widely separated as Malaysia, Australia, and Mbabane, Swaziland.

Over the years, correspondence I have received has indicated that fly tying is one thing to make many people: all find it rewarding. But each tyer finds it rewarding in a different way. An eye surgeon told me that being right-handed he felt it necessary to become just as skillful with his left hand. Being an excellent fly tyer, and using those techniques to train his left hand, he developed the dexterity with which he now ties equally well with either hand. The discipline, giving him perfect control of either hand, has proved invaluable in his unusually delicate and vital profession.

Many fly tyers keep this book not only for reference but to improve certain aspects of their own tying; some have used it to start their tying all over again.

When the Berkshire Museum, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, asked us to prepare an exhibition on "Fishing and Fly Tying," we gathered flies tied by amateurs only, from coast to coast. All of the flies submitted were of excellent quality, evidence of many happy hours spent on the fundamentals of fly tying. The ages of the contributors ranged from six to eighty! In the "Father and Son" category was a trio: grandfather, son, and grandson! And the occupations represented were almost endless in their diversity. Fly tying has an appeal for people of all ages and all occupations.

For me, it is gratifying to know that so many have found this book indispensable, and that a new edition is needed after so many years.

—HELEN SHAW  
February 1987

# Foreword

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About 15 years ago, Helen Shaw gave me a little box of her dry flies. The following June, when I was fishing for Atlantic salmon in Hosmer Lake, Oregon, I found them rising to a small, dark May fly and tied on one of Helen's flies. It was a No. 10 quill Gordon, tied on a barbless hook, and the salmon loved it. These fish ran from 2½ to 5 pounds, ran like bonefish, and jumped like tarpon. But I caught and released eight or ten before my fly began to sink. Then I tied on another like it and caught as many more. It was by far my best day on Hosmer, and all I did between fish was to drag the fly through the water to wash off the slime and false cast for half a minute to dry it.

A fly that will do what these flies did is a *good* fly. These days you can pay enough for a dozen dry flies to buy a bottle of the best Scotch and every one of them will start sinking after it has taken a couple of fish—and not big fish, either. Two things determine the quality of a dry fly: The quality of the materials and the skill of the tyer. I don't consider myself skillful, but I tie better flies than I can buy because I don't compromise on materials.

This book tells you how to select materials and how to use them. Learning how to handle feather, fur, silk, and tinsel is two-thirds of the struggle of learning to tie flies. Helen Shaw tells (*and shows*) you how. In addition, this new edition of *Fly-Tying*—which has been the most popular book on the subject since it came out in 1963—has an all-new section. If you enjoy tying flies and want to improve the quality, or if you simply want to save money by tying your own, this is the book for you.

*Nampa, Idaho*  
*Fall, 1979*

TED TRUEBLOOD

# Preface

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It is gratifying to know that the interest in fly-tying has increased dramatically since this book was first published in 1963. As a hobby requiring both skill and patience, it can be found enjoyable, and profitable too, in many ways. It is one that can be learned at any age that is responsible for careful use of hooks and scissors.

Practice with the basic materials is as important today as it has ever been. Manual dexterity is gained through practice, and with dexterity, confidence and speed in tying develop and increase. One's fingers are more sensitive in manipulating the materials than when using tools. But if tools are vital to the tyer, they are available. Practice and patience are invaluable.

I have been fortunate to have the indispensable help of my husband Hermann Kessler, who has established a number of original concepts for *Field and Stream* Magazine, where he was Art Director for more than twenty-five years. With his photographs and planning of this book, he set a style for subsequent books on fly-tying, and has enabled me to bring the lessons that form the foundation of the craft to as many as possible who want to learn.

*Red Rock, New York*  
*September, 1979*

HELEN SHAW

# Tools

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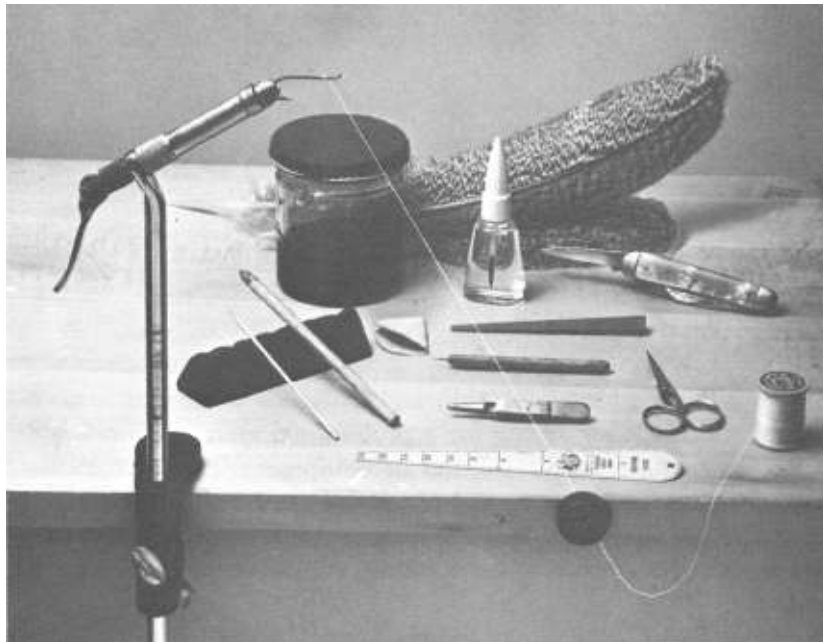
A minimum selection of tools and materials is all that is necessary for the beginner. Even for professional tyer, it is preferable to have a small, useful collection of equipment, carefully chosen. The initial cost is moderate and one is not burdened with materials or equipment for which there is little or no real need. The addition of special materials or extra pieces of equipment can always be made.

**WISE.** The vise must be adjustable for height and have a clamp base that will provide a firm grip on the edge of the tying table. Its jaws should be tapered, of excellent-quality steel, and adjustable for either large or small hooks. A lever control is comfortable to use; it is quickly and easily raised with an upward movement of the left hand to open the jaws, while downward pressure on it securely tightens the hook against a hook.

**SCISSORS.** One good pair of scissors will suffice. It should be of good steel with straight, sturdy blades not over 4 inches in length including the finger grips. The blades should taper to a fine, sharp point.

**PLIERS.** Several good fly-tying pliers are available, and all are made to remain closed without pressure and to open when pressed. Select whichever style you prefer, but make sure that the jaws have a firm grip.

**STYLET.** A serviceable one can be made by embedding a needle in a wooden dowel. The needle point is necessary for removing varnish from the hook eyes of finished flies, for releasing hackle barbs that have been bound down in tying, and for “picking out” dubbing bodies. A small hatpin can be substituted for this useful tool.



**RUBBER BUTTON.** Attached to the front edge of the tying table approximately 8 inches to the right of the vise base, the rubber button becomes a grip to hold the tying thread and to maintain tension on it while the tyer's hands are busy elsewhere. It is called a rubber bumper and has a screw center. It is inexpensive and can be purchased at any hardware store.

**WOODEN DOWELS.** A few dowels the length and diameter of a pencil will be useful, as a wax stick

for a stylet handle.

**HOOK HONE.** A good hone is always necessary to insure needle-sharp points on all hooks. There are several available shapes from which to choose, all of which are approximately 4 inches in length.

**HACKLE GAUGE.** For use in determining the size of hackles to use for various hook sizes, which is roughly 1½ times the distance between the point and the hook shank.

The following, although technically not tools, are necessities basic to the craft of fly-tying.

**WAX.** The wax I use on tying thread is made according to a very old recipe, with powdered or crystallized rosin and turpentine. The rosin is called Pinus Palustris, N. F. (National Formulary) in the United States Dispensatory. It is relatively inexpensive, and a quarter of a pound of the golden-amber crystals would make enough wax to last a very, very long time. A wide-topped glass jar about 2¾ inches in diameter and 3¼ inches high is a convenient size for use on the tying table, and for storing away when not in use. It is filled to a depth of 1 inch with rosin. Just enough turpentine to saturate the rosin is added. The jar is sealed and uncovered in a pan of hot water over a very low flame, or an electrical heating unit, and allowed to remain until the rosin and turpentine become a clear amber substance about the consistency of honey. As it cools the wax thickens until semi-firm. This wax, insoluble in water, will eventually set or harden, acting as a binder to the materials it touches.

**WAX PAD.** A small piece of oilcloth, about 2 inches square, makes a good holder for a little of the wax. A few inches of tying thread is pulled gently through the wax when the tyer is ready to begin work. A fresh pad can be made whenever needed. I have found this method of waxing thread to be desirable because it permits the tyer to regulate the amount of wax he wants anywhere throughout the construction of a fly.

**LACQUER.** The head of a fly and any other exposed windings of thread should be covered with a penetrating waterproof varnish or lacquer to give them a permanent finish. A bottle of colorless nail polish can be used, since it comes in a small, convenient quantity, is colorless, has its own applicator, and is inexpensive. The little brush, however, should be trimmed to a fine point.

**TYING TABLE.** The tying table should be large enough to hold all necessary tools and materials required at the moment without crowding. A drawing board 20 by 26 inches makes an excellent tying surface which can be placed wherever the tyer finds it most convenient to work. It has a smooth finish and can be easily stored when not in use.

With the vise attached firmly to the front edge, the lever at the left, the hook in the vise should be centered and at a height comfortable for viewing while tying is in progress. Adjust the jaws to grip the hook firmly but not over-tightly, so that you may also release the hook quickly. Attach the rubber button to the front edge also, approximately 8 inches to the right of the vise base. A small finishing nail driven into the top surface a few inches to the right of the rubber button becomes a spindle to hold your spool of tying thread. This arrangement gives you the maximum free area for manual movement around your vise.

Lay the scissors, pliers, stylet, and prepared wax pad within convenient reach of your hand. Always replace each in the same spot so that reaching for them will become automatic, an economy of movement that will be valuable to you later. Establish this good habit from the very beginning, and once you have mastered handling your materials, you will find that your speed in tying will increase easily.

because of it.

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# Tying Thread

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The technique I use may be called the continuous-thread technique. When employing this method, the most important thing to remember is to keep the tying thread taut. The thread is the binding medium, anchoring all materials to the hook. It must be kept taut from the beginning until the finishing knot secures the entire fly. After you have learned to manipulate the materials easily and to secure them properly to the hook, you will begin to combine a tail and body, a body with wing and hackle, and so on. The thread will be the continuous, uninterrupted binder for all the parts or sections of which the fly is composed.

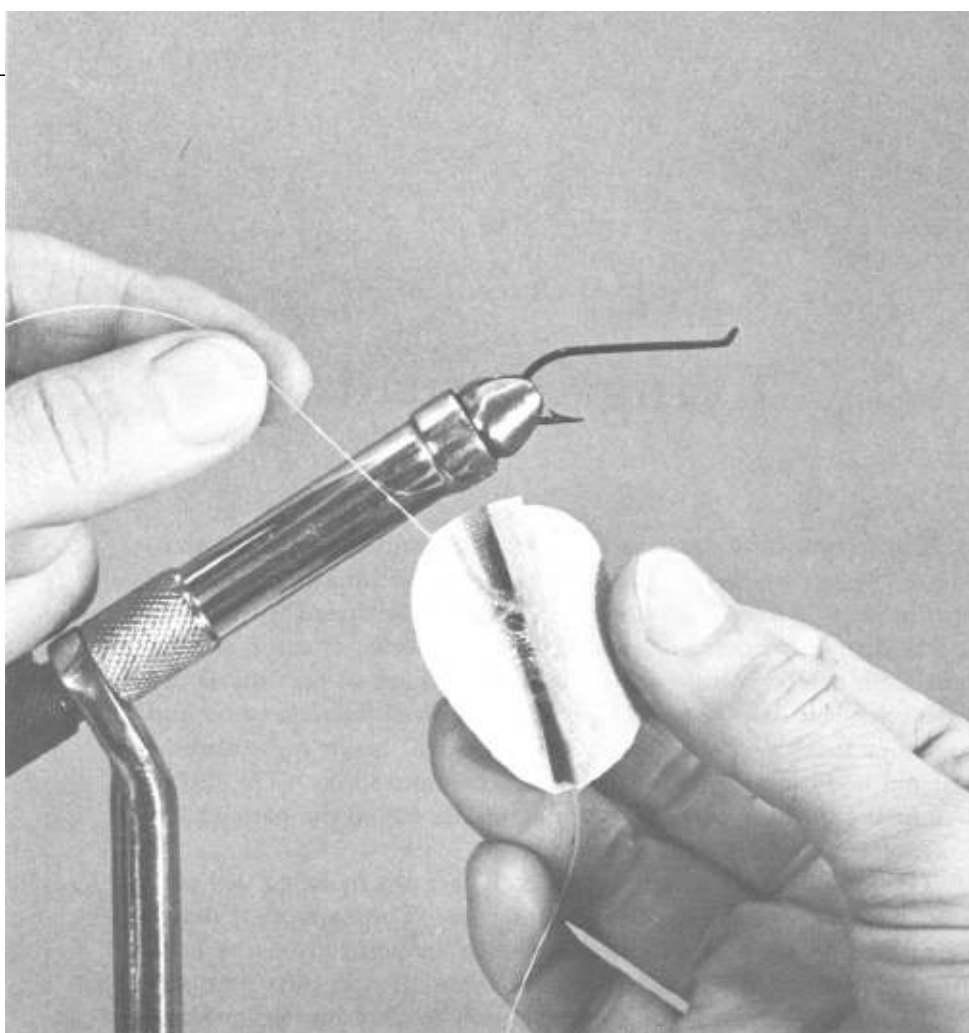
The following photographs show each part of a fly being tied onto a hook with the remainder of the hook bare. Thus, a wing is shown being tied on alone in order to emphasize its position on the hook and the manner in which it is bound there. Tying each part of a fly should be practiced this way repeatedly so that you will concentrate solely on one part at a time, thus acquiring the ability to tie each part quickly and well.

A black salmon-fly hook was selected for demonstration. A hook of this size is preferable for a practice-tying. The turned-up eye prevents the tying thread from slipping forward off the hook. The thread used is an ordinary spool of white nylon thread found wherever sewing supplies are sold.

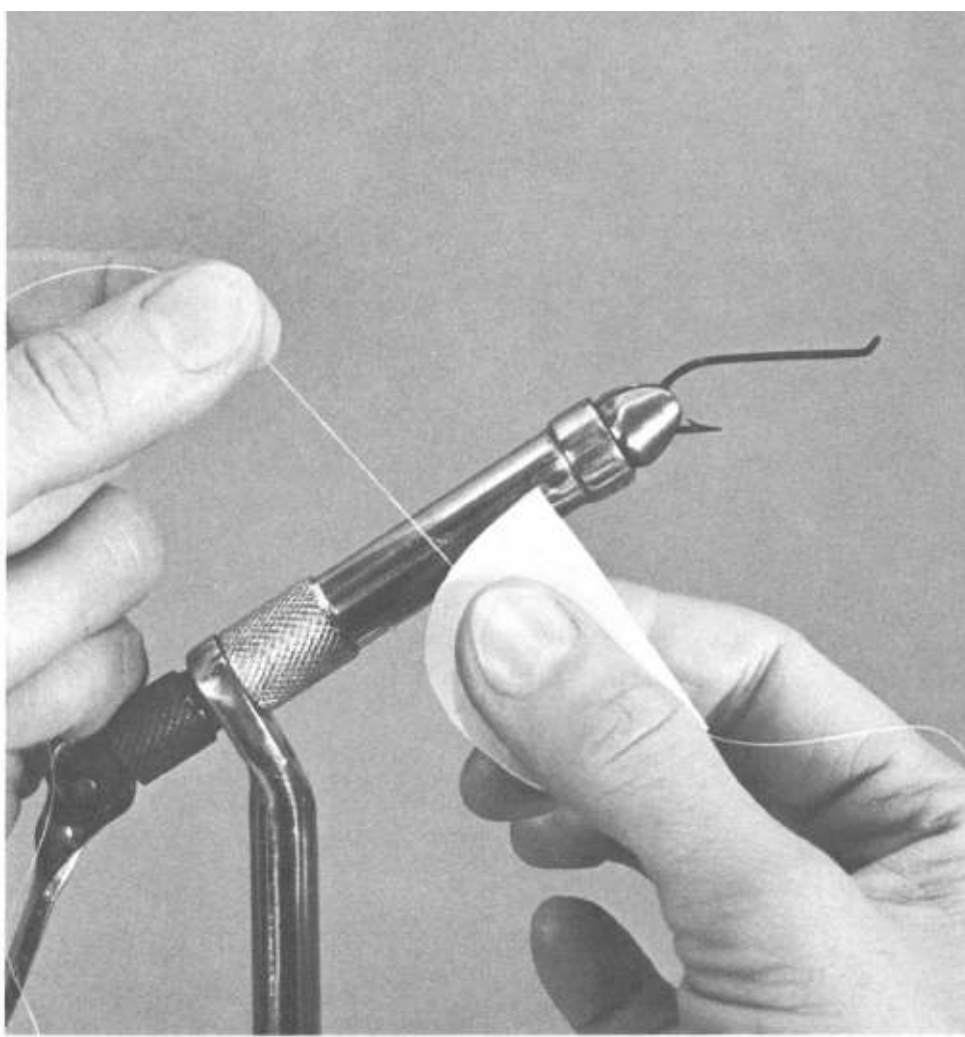
If some of the instructions seem to be repetitious, this is because fly-tying itself is repetitive. Until the motions necessary to tying each part of the fly become automatic, reiteration is necessary here but will be held to a minimum.

The first step in fly-tying is to wax the tying thread.

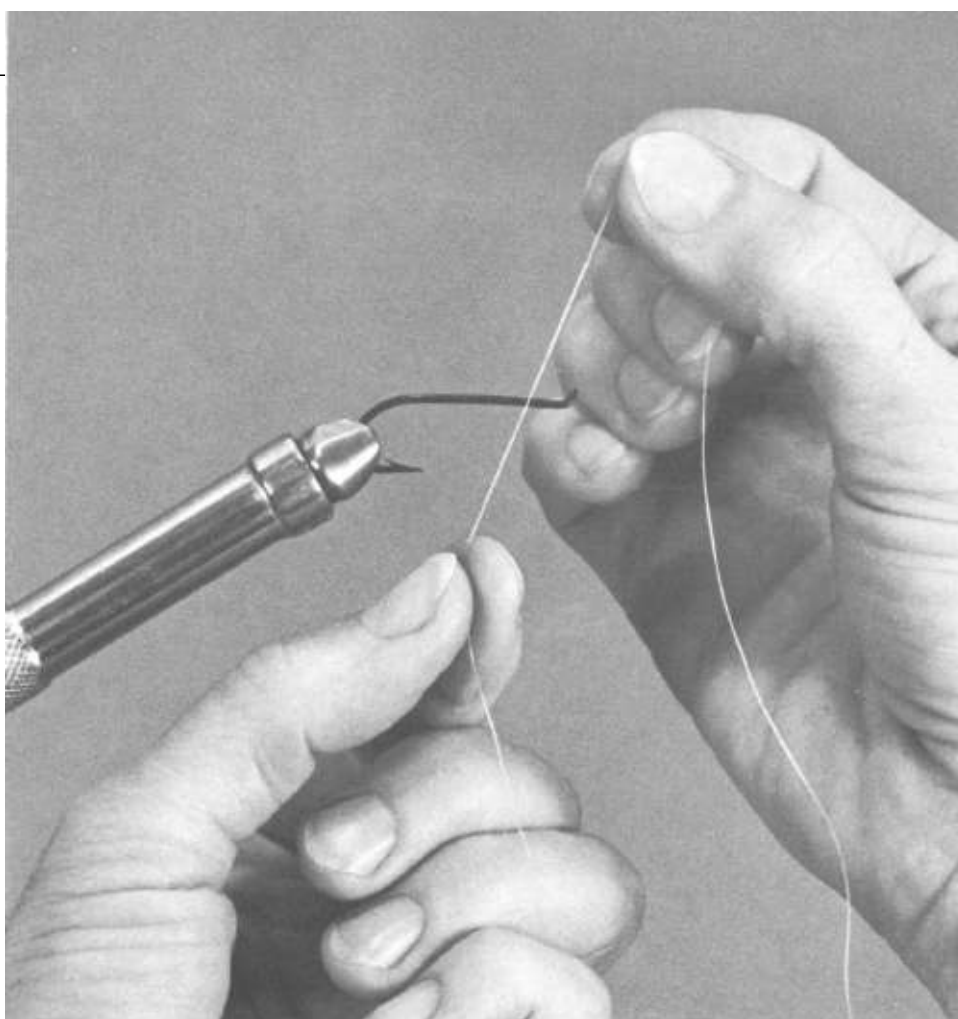




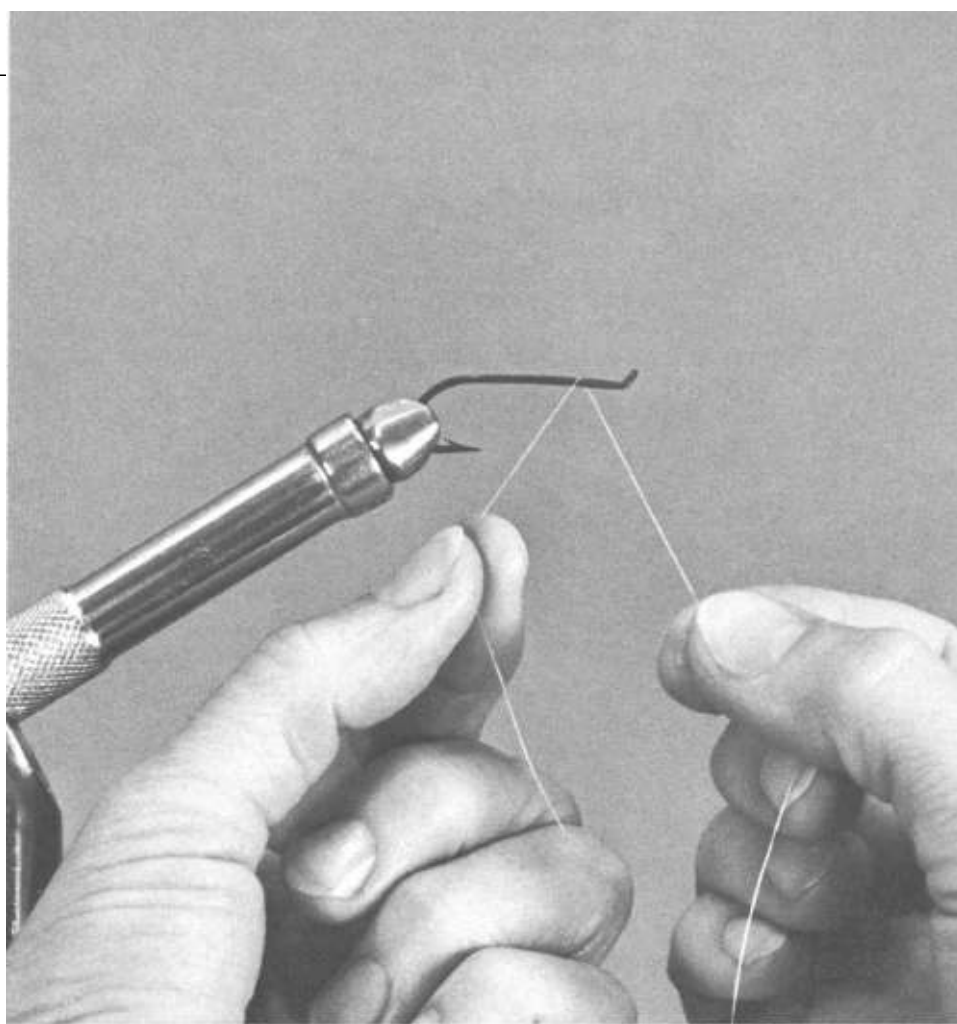
**1a.** Draw the thread directly from the spool on its spindle. Wax about 6 inches of it at a time. Lay the thread across the wax on the open wax pad.



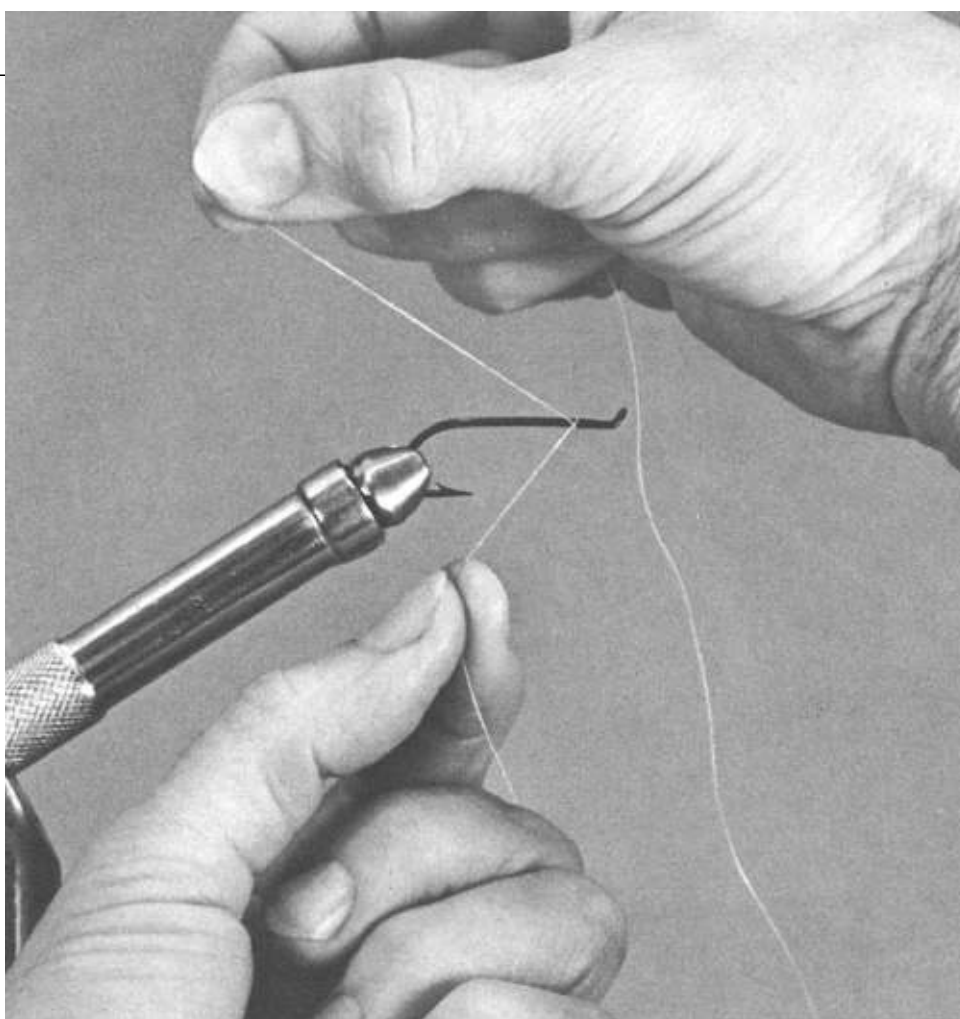
**1b.** Fold the wax pad over the thread. Hold it firmly enough to force the thread into the wax. Pull the end of the thread through the wax. Any excess wax will be removed by the unwaxed edge of the pad. The waxed thread should be “tacky,” not sticky. If too much wax clings to the thread, draw it through the pad again close to the edge away from the waxed center.



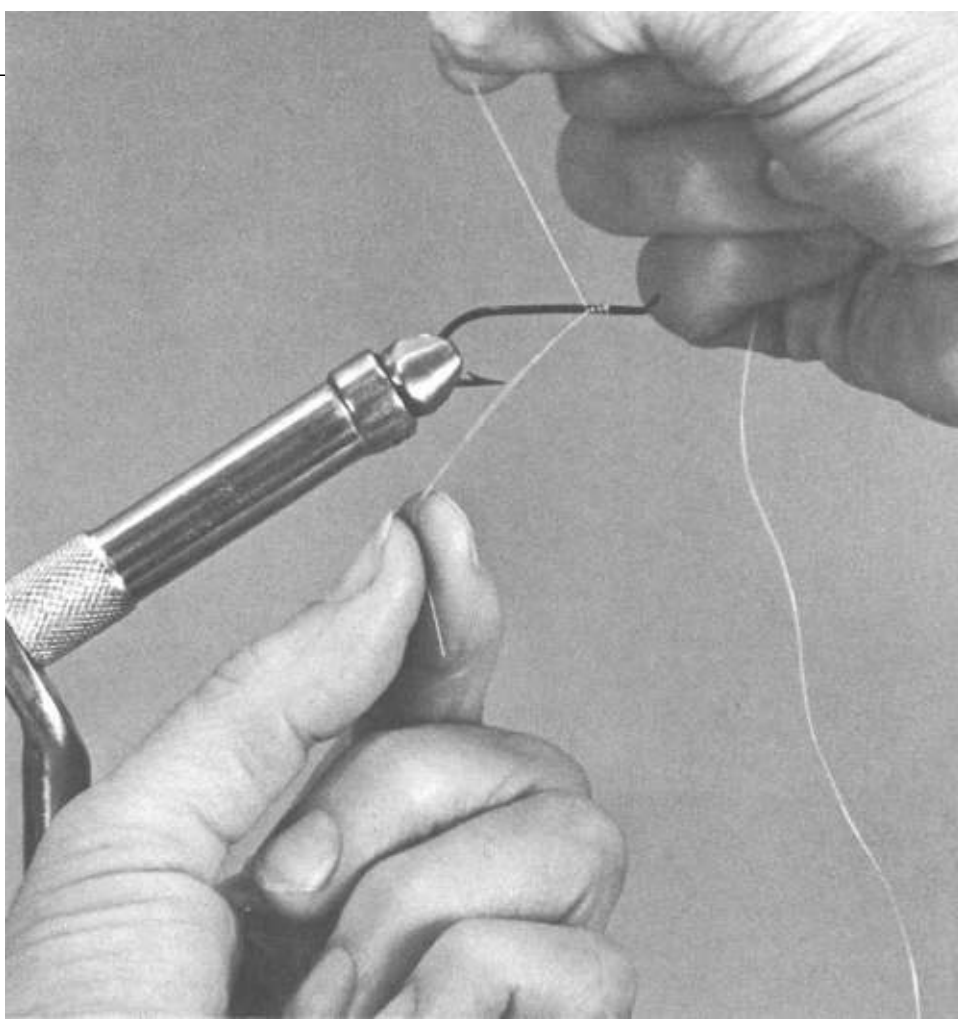
**2a.** Hold the end of the waxed thread in the left hand and place the thread against the hook at “winding position” as shown.



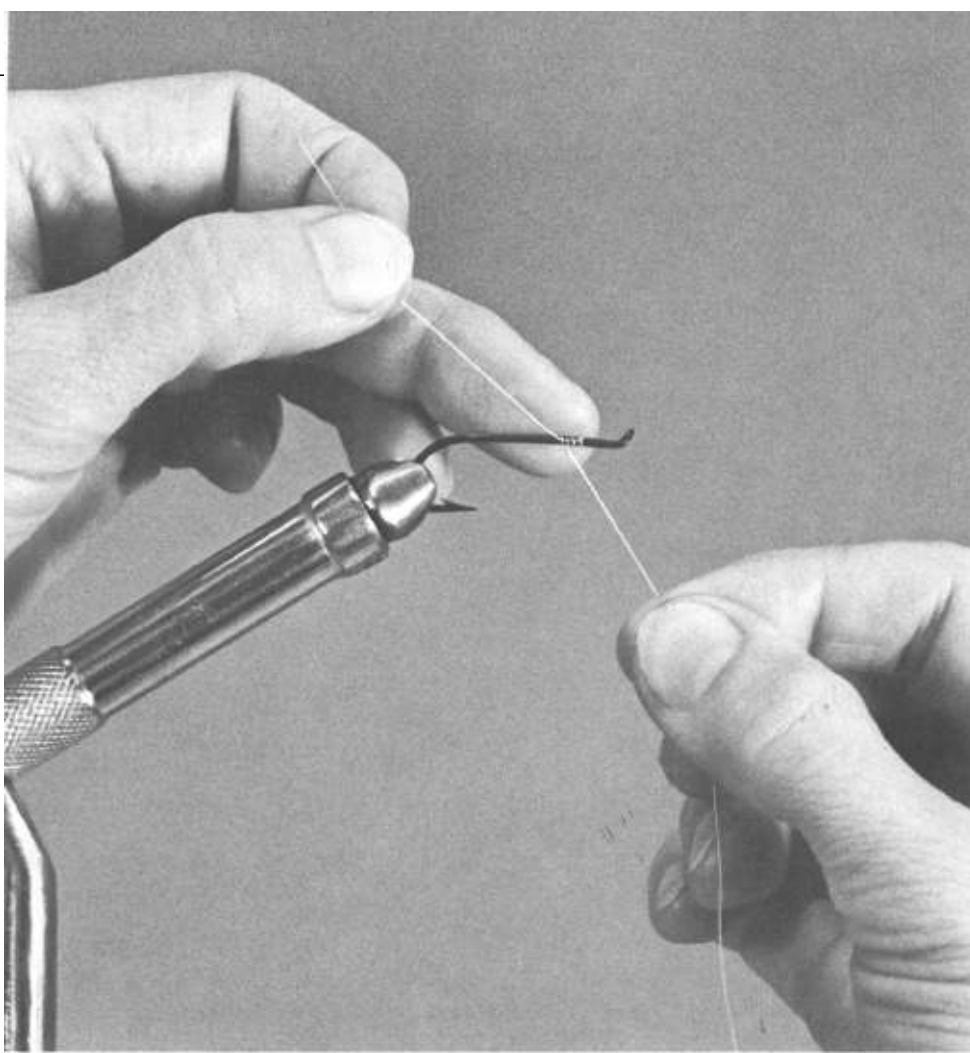
**2b.** With the right hand, carry the thread down behind the hook. Notice that the thread is held taut against the hook, the fingers gripping it a short distance from the hook.



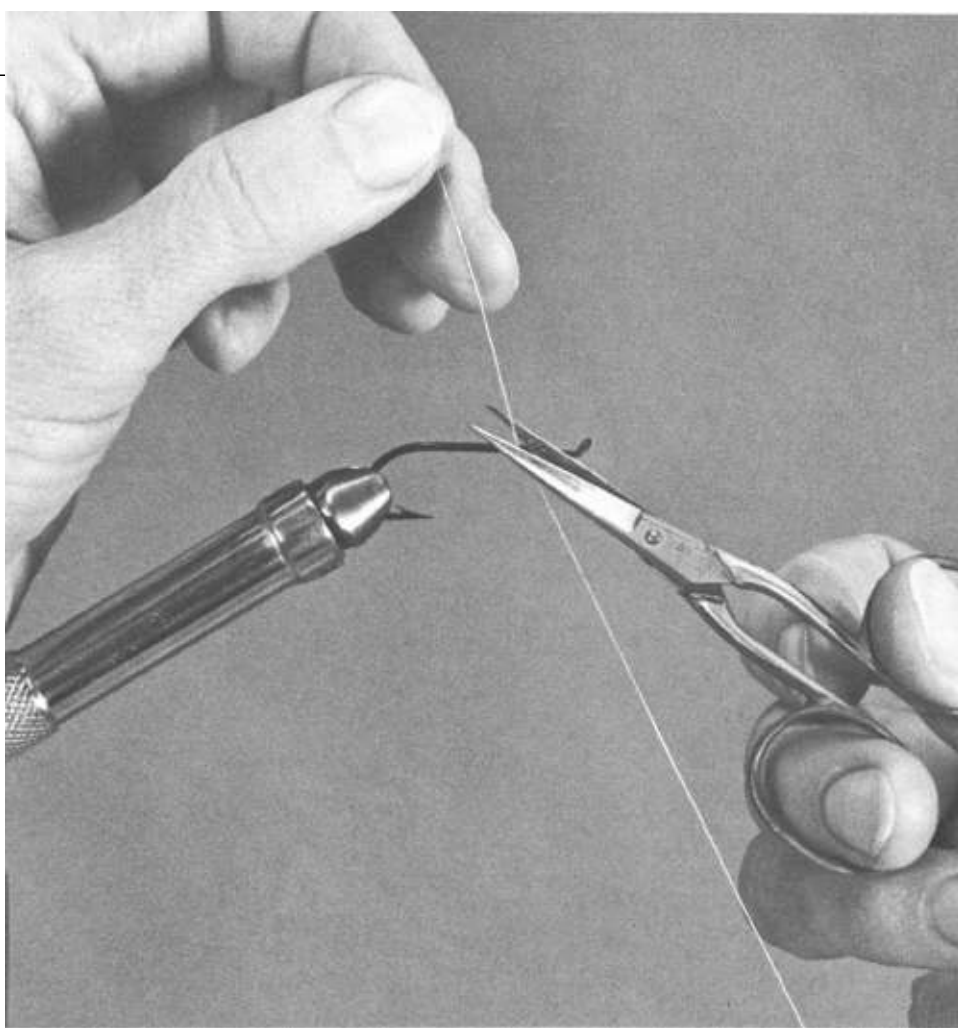
2c. Continuing with the right hand, bring the thread up in front of the hook and across the three prongs of the hook, which is held against the hook with the left hand.



**2d.** Carry the thread down behind the hook and up in front three times, creating a spiral winding. Each turn of thread close to the preceding one but farther away from the hook eye, binding the thread held by the left hand securely against the hook.



**2e.** Keep a grip on the end of the thread with the left thumb and forefinger and extend the middle finger to press against the thread winding, to prevent it from loosening while the right hand slides down the thread and catches it snugly behind the rubber button.



2f. The rubber button will maintain tension on the thread, freeing the right hand to pick up the scissors and cut off the short end of the thread close to the windings on the hook. The thread is attached to the hook at “wing position.” Now! *Unwind* the thread from the hook and follow the instructions on more from the beginning. Practice attaching the thread until you can do it quickly and with assurance.



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