

The Absolute Best and Easiest Way to Whittling



Pretty Patterns to Begin

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Contents

Beginner's Guide To Whittling	1
Little Whittled Dinosaur	11
Viking Chess Piece	19
Forest Spirit Wood Carving	26
Carved And Painted Eagle Feather	36
Smoothly Carved Boomerang	48

Beginner's Guide To Whittling

What You Need: The Knife and the WoodThe Wood

Softwoods are the best for whittling because they cut nice and easy. After you've learned the basics of whittling, feel free to move on to harder woods. No matter which kind of wood you use, look for wood with a straight grain as it is easier to whittle than wood that has the grain going in multiple directions. Avoid wood with lots of knots—those are a booger to whittle.

Check your local lumber yard or woodworking store for whittling wood. Craft stores, like Hobby Lobby, often carry a variety of softwoods that are good for whittling. I picked up all my whittling wood at Hobby Lobby for a few bucks. Just avert your eyes from the fake flowers and wicker baskets as you shop.

Below I've included a short list of the most popular whittling woods.

Basswood. Basswood has been used for millennia for woodcarving. During the Middle Ages, it was the preferred wood of German sculptors who crafted elaborate altar pieces. It's a good wood to whittle with because it's soft and doesn't have much grain. You can pick up basswood blocks in various sizes at your local craft store for a reasonable price.

Pine. Pine is another traditional whittling wood. It's soft, cuts easily, and is readily available.

But it has its drawbacks. Some whittlers think pine doesn't hold detail very well. And if you're using a fresh pine twig or branch, you'll have to regularly clean the sticky sap off your knife while you're whittling.

Balsa. Balsa wood is a soft, inexpensive, lightweight wood that's perfect for beginning whittlers. You can buy it by the boatloads at craft stores like Hobby Lobby for pretty cheap. I picked up 9 blocks of balsa wood for a little under \$4.

Random twigs and branches. You don't need a pre-cut block of wood to whittle. Twigs and branches from most kinds of trees make for great whittling. There's nothing more enjoyable than sitting around a campfire and whittling away at a twig while you talk to your buddies. Wooden knives are a popular item to whittle from a tree branch.

The Knife



Pocket Knife. For generations, whittlers have used nothing but their trusty pocket knife to create ruggedly handsome works of art. And some whittling purists will argue that the pocket knife is the only acceptable tool for true whittling. Pocket knives are certainly an excellent choice because they're so portable. Anytime you find a good piece of wood, you can just whip out your pocket knife and start sculpting your wooden masterpiece. Another benefit of pocket knives is that they provide multiple blade types in a single knife. When you need to do some more intricate carving, you can simply open up your smaller more flexible

blade. Need to make bigger cuts? Use the larger knife blade.



Specialty whittling knives. Several types of specialty whittling knives exist on the market today. Unlike pocket knives, they're fixed blade, meaning they don't fold. Fixed blades offer a bit more sturdiness than what you get with a folding knife. Another nice feature of specialty whittling knives is that they often have curved handles that fit comfortably in your hand to help reduce fatigue during long whittling sessions.

Flexcut offers a wide selection of different kinds of whittling knives, and I bought this starter set from them. I've been happy with the knives. They hold an edge nicely and are easy to sharpen. The ergonomically shaped handle does indeed help reduce hand fatigue compared to carving with a pocket knife.

It's nice to have a set of specialty whittling knives for when you're whittling at home, while using your pocket knife for whittling sessions on the go.

The First Rule of Whittling: Keep Your Knife Sharp



If you want your whittling experience to be pleasurable and relaxing, keep your knife sharp. The first time I tried my hand at whittling, I noticed that the wood was getting harder and harder to cut. I figured it must have been the wood, so I just soldiered on, applying more and more pressure with the knife. After my hands started aching something fierce, it finally dawned on me that my knife probably needed some sharpening.

After a few strokes on the sharpening stone and strop, I started carving again. It was like I was carving a warm block of butter. The blade glided right through the wood.

Now, whenever I feel the wood getting harder to cut, I stop and sharpen my knife.

Whittling Safety, or How Not To Get Blood All Over Your Project

The first time I attempted some serious whittling (not just carving a twig into a spear point), I kind of went at it with reckless abandon. I thought, “Hey, I’ve used knives my whole life.

I'm pretty sure I can carve this piece of wood without coming close to cutting myself."

Pride goeth before the fall.

About five minutes in, the knife blade slipped from the wood and went right into my thumb, opening up a nice-sized cut. I pressed on, but I ended up getting blood all over my project. Another ten minutes in, the blade skipped off a knot and glanced my index finger. More blood. At this point, my wood was slippery with hemoglobin, so I had to stop.

To avoid the same bloody fate as me, I offer the following whittling safety tips:

Take it slow. No need to rush! Whittling is supposed to be relaxing and meditative. When you get in a hurry with your cuts, that's when accidents happen. Make every cut slow and controlled.

Keep your knife sharp. Obeying the first rule of whittling will not only ensure better cuts, it will also ensure that you keep all your fingers. Instead of cutting, dull blades have a tendency to glance off the wood and head right towards your hand. While the blade might not be sharp enough to cut wood, it's usually still sharp enough to cut human flesh.

Wear gloves when you first start. Until you get comfortable with the different knife strokes, I'd recommend wearing a pair of leather work gloves when you first start whittling. Yes, the gloves feel a little cumbersome at first, but you quickly adjust.

If you don't wear gloves, use a thumb pad. The thumb on your knife-holding hand tends to

get the brunt of the nicks and glances. To protect your thumb, wear a thumb pad. They're really cheap—you can buy leather thumb pads on Amazon for about \$1.50. The problem with these is when they wear out, you'll have to buy another set. Another solution that works just as well is duct tape. Before you start whittling, simply wrap your knife-holding thumb with duct tape. To avoid getting sticky stuff on your thumb, use this technique:

Wrap one layer of duct tape around your thumb with the sticky side facing out. Wrap it tight enough so it won't slip off, but not so tight that you lose circulation to your thumb.

Then wrap a couple of layers of duct tape around your thumb with the sticky side facing in. Four or five layers should do the trick.

Wood Grain

Sometimes it's easy to tell the direction of the grain on a piece of wood simply by looking at it. But oftentimes it's not that obvious. If you're having a hard time deciphering which way the grain is going, start making some small shallow cuts in your wood. Cuts made with the grain will peel away smoothly; cuts made against the grain will give resistance and eventually split.

Generally, you want most of your cuts to go with the wood's grain. Cuts against the grain cause your wood to tear, split, and just plain look ugly. Plus, the resistance the wood gives when you cut against the grain makes whittling much more difficult.

Don't get frustrated if you lose track of which way the grain runs while you're in the middle of the project. It happens to most people when they're first getting started with woodworking of any kind. It happened to me at least. Just keep practicing, and you'll eventually get a feel for figuring out wood grain.

Types of Whittling Cuts

Several cutting styles exist in whittling, but we'll just stick with the basics for the purposes of this article. The directions assume you're right-handed. Simply flip them if you're a southpaw.

Straightaway Rough Cutting

Use this cut at the very beginning of your project to carve your project's general shape. Hold the wood in your left hand and your knife firmly in your right. Make a long, sweeping cut with the grain and away from your body. Don't cut too deep or you might split the wood. Make several, thin slices to reduce the wood to the desired size and shape.

Pull Stroke (Pare Cut)

If you've ever seen an old-timer whittle, chances are you saw him using the pull stroke. It's the most used cut in whittling. To perform this cut, imagine you're paring an apple. Hold the wood in your left hand, the knife in your right with the blade facing towards you. Brace your right thumb against the wood, and squeeze your right fingers in order to draw the blade to

your right thumb. Make your stroke short and controlled. Keep your right thumb out of the path of the blade. For added safety, wear a thumb pad.

The pull stroke gives you lots of control over your blade and is best for detailed cuts.

Push Stroke (Thumb Pushing)

Sometimes where you want to cut won't allow you to do the pull stroke. That's when it's time to bust out the push stroke. Hold the wood in your left hand and the knife firmly in your right hand with the blade facing away from you. Place both your right and left thumbs on the back of the knife blade. Push the blade forward with your left thumb while your right thumb and fingers guide the blade through the wood.

The push stroke, like the pull stroke, gives you greater control over your knife for detailed cuts.

What to Whittle

So you have your tools and wood and know the basic cuts. Now, what to whittle?

For beginners, I'd suggest you keep it simple. Keith Randich, author of *Old Time Whittling*, suggests beginners whittle an egg as their first project. Yeah, an egg. I know, not very exciting. But a simple project like an egg is a good way to introduce beginning whittlers to the law of wood grains. Here's a guide to carving your very own wooden egg.

After you've mastered the egg, you can move on to some simple patterns. Cowboy boots are a popular whittling project as well as animals. You can buy books with ready-to-go whittling patterns. All you have to do is simply transfer the pattern to your wood and start whittling.

Or you could just sort of wing it and make up your own pattern. I thought it would be cool to whittle a duck's head, so I took a piece of wood, drew an outline of a duck's head on both sides of it, and started whittling.

Little Whittled Dinosaur



Step 1: Tools

Let's start with tools;

Knife

You're going to need a knife. While you could conceivably use any kind of sharp knife, I highly recommend investing in something nice... I use the chip carving knife pictured here. High quality tools are going to be hand-made with tempered steel that will cut better and last longer than the low quality stuff. There are chip carving knives with different shapes that will make difficult cuts a little easier, although they aren't necessary for the beginner.

Sharpening Supplies

You'll be putting your knife/knives through a lot of stress and thus you will need to sharpen them. You can buy sharpening stones or you can use a combination of 600+ grit sandpaper and water or oil. Any piece of leather will work as a strop. I won't get into sharpening in this instructable, however there are plenty of resources out there for you to learn.

Step 2: Wood

So once you have your tools, you'll need something to carve. There are tons of different kinds of wood and they all carve differently. My recommendation (and the wood that I learned how to carve with) is basswood. It's cheap and you should be able to find it locally. The grain is small and the wood is soft.

However, it isn't crucial that you even know what kind of wood you have, so don't worry. Use what you have— that's part of the fun of carving wood.

Make sure the wood is dry; you'll have more control over it. Carving with wet wood adds a level of unpredictability, since as it dries it tends to warp and crack.

Step 3: Grain



Understanding grain is essential to wood carving... This is where your intuition will develop over time. While I will not go into the science behind the structure of wood, I will say that it grows in regular patterns that appear as grain. The orientation of the grain is going to

determine how easily you can carve the wood. If you've ever had a splinter, you know what grain is and how its orientation matters.

You will want to start with straight-grain wood (which is exactly what it sounds like), where the grain runs in one direction. You can use the ends to determine what direction the grain runs in. The pictures below show you what to look for. Note that the grain can go down slightly... this will be important.

Basic vocabulary is as follows: when you are carving in the same direction as the grain, you are carving with the grain. If you are carving opposite the direction of the grain, you are carving against the grain. If you are carving perpendicular to the grain, you are carving across the grain.

Which way to carve:

You always want to carve with the grain or across the grain. The grain can also run up and down slightly, so make sure you are carving with the grain in the down direction. The next step contains pictures of carvings in each direction for your reference.

Step 4: Safety / Holding the Knife



Before we start, let's go over holding the knife correctly:

The picture below will show you how to hold the knife. When right-handed, my left hand is holding the piece of wood and my right hand is holding the knife. My left thumb is on the back of the blade and will be providing the cutting force. Never push the blade forward with your right hand; you will not be able to move the blade with precision.

Notice that my fingers are out of the path of the blade.

Don't be silly:

Never push hard on the blade. If it gets stuck (because you carved too deep into the wood

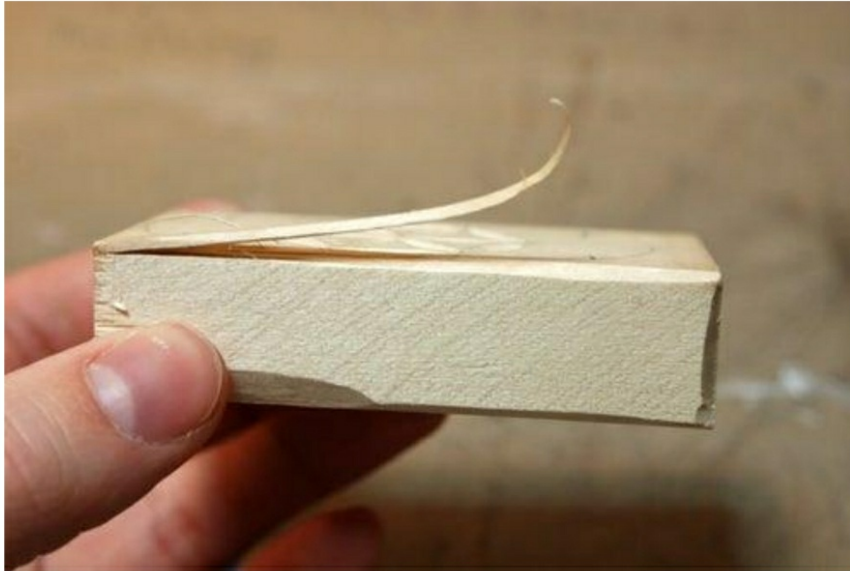
or the grain orientation changed), stop and backtrack. If you try to force the blade, it could slip and cut your finger.

There's no need to go fast... Speed doesn't help you carve better. Take your time, at least until you feel comfortable carving.

Pay attention:

The sound and the feel of your cuts are important. You can hear the difference between carving with, against, and across the grain. This will be useful in developing intuition about the direction you are cutting in.

Step 5: Technique



So let's figure out what actually happens when you carve:

You'll be making a scooping motion. First, the knife has to dig into the surface of the wood a little bit. The knife must then be pushed through the wood; it's all about the angle! As you push through the wood, angle the knife up ever-so-slightly and you will have shaved off a bit of wood. With many types of wood, the shavings will curl; this is an indication that you are going in the right direction.

You should remove the wood in very thin layers; if you go too deep, you'll end up tearing out on the way back up.

The pictures below will show you what it looks like when you go with the grain, against the grain, and across the grain.

Also, your shavings are fairly informative. Check out the difference between shavings going against the grain and shavings going with the grain.

Step 6: Practice

A good way to learn knife control is to try keeping the knife at a fixed angle; see how long of a shaving you can make in one cut.

The more you carve, the more you will understand the grain. It's somewhat difficult to explain in a paragraph with a few pictures, but it will make sense as you experience it first-hand.

Start with gently curving objects that allow you some room to make mistakes. As you get better, add details regardless of the orientation of the grain; there is always a way to make the right cut.

Viking Chess Piece



Step 1: Tools Needed



You only need a saw and a knife to make this pieces.

A small whittling knife or a chip knife is the best suited for the carving. But any small sharp knife will do the job. And a bigger knife is needed to split the wood into the 4 pieces needed.

I use my hand forged knives and a pull saw.

If you don't have a suitable knife already I recoment you buy a pfeil or a flexcut I have used both brands and they a both very good. And they are available many places online.

Step 2: Preparing and Splitting the Wood



Cut a length of green wood. I use a branch of hassle I have just cut down a few days ago. When you use green wood the carving is much easier because the wood is softer.

You can use any kind of green wood. I can recommend alder, hassle and willow for beginners. They are easy to come by, they are soft and grow straight, and therefore are easy to carve.

For the more skilled and experienced you can go for the harder kinds of wood like black cherry, apple, mayflower or maple. Or yew if you can get your hands on some.

Yew and alder are even soft and easily carved after they dry and the wood have cured.

Step 3: The Rough Cuts







I start to shape the face and beard of the viking. I keep the cuts coarse at this stage.

Step 4: The Fine Cuts



In the last steps I smoothed out the square impression and ad details like eyes and mouth.

Forest Spirit Wood Carving



Step 1: Tools Needed



A pocket knife

A marker pen (or pencil)

A piece of wood**

**this piece is birch wood

Step 2:



Draw your face!

I always start with the nose, get that central the add the eyebrows too fit.. And then the eyes!

You can get creative with the beard :)

Step 3:

Start at the top and work down..

Remember you can always cut more wood off! You can't put it back on.. So take you time!

You'll get there in the end :)

Using the tip of your knife. cut into and along the marked lines you have drawn around the nose and eyebrows then carve out the top using a stop cut.

Step 4:



Now carve out the eyes.. Take it layer by layer untill you reach the depth you want

Step 5:

Now clean off the bark to create the skin line of the face. The bark should just peel off in layers

Step 6:



Add cheek bones to give character

Step 7:



Peel off the bark on the eyebrows using the tip of your knife but leave the inner layer of bark to add colour

Peel off the bark on the nose down to the wood

And next cut out the mouth

Step 8:

Now for the beard! Cut down the line of the beard

Step 9:

Peel the bark off

Step 10:



Next peel the bark of the moustache!! And you are almost done..

Now just go over cleaning out and bitty pieces of wood in the corners along the edges

You can add extra detail by cutting lips under the mouth and between the moustache and beard

Step 11:



Marvel at your wonderful creation!!

Well done

Step 12:

Get creative.. Try out different beards and moustaches, angle the eyebrows to add emotion and character, different length noses! Just have fun and be safe while using a sharp knife

Carved And Painted Eagle Feather



Step 1: Items Needed





1. Piece of wood about 14x3x3/8. I used a slat of a pallet but any soft wood will be fine.
2. Pattern. I included one for you to use.
3. Bandsaw or coping saw
4. knife, V-tool needed and a gouge would be helpful.
5. Sandpaper. 6. Paints and brushes.

Step 2: Draw Pattern and Cut Out



Sand the wood fairly smooth and trace the pattern onto the wood then cut out. I used a

band saw to do this. The band saw saves time but you can always use a coping saw for this. Then draw in the rest of the pattern lines with a pencil.

Step 3: Thin and Round Off Feather





Before you begin, ALWAYS use caution and never cut towards any body part including your hands, it is a good idea to use a carving glove. Plus, always cut with the grain of the wood, if you are cutting and the wood starts tearing you are going the wrong direction and need to cut from the other way. Use V-tool to make stop cut along quill on both sides, you want to go deep enough to make quill stand out good. I will take a few passes probably to get to the depth you want. Don't try and do it all with one pass, as it is harder to control when pushing down hard and unsafe. After the stop cut is done take knife or gouge and remove excess wood from the feather on both sides of the quill. Next you will want to round the feather off from quill to edge of feather.

Step 4: Shape and Round Head





Use V-tool to make stop cuts along the beak, back of the head and the line above the eye. I like to take my knife a cut the round shape of the eye, then remove the wood around the circle of the eye so it protrudes a little. Now round the eye off. Start rounding the edges of the head and beak. Then cut up to the stop cuts on the beak. You will be removing the wood from the beak so it is deeper down than the head. The lower beak needs to be deeper than the upper beak. Round off all hard edges along the beak and top of eye. I also make sure there are no saw marks anywhere on the carving. use a knife or gouge to remove these.

Step 5: Smooth Feather Up





Make sure feather is rounded down nicely, then take a knife and round off the quill and put a good taper on the end of it, I like to sand the feather a little to smooth it up a bit, especially the quill itself. the rest of the feather not as important but I still hit it a little. The head I don't sand, but that is up to you.

Step 6: Adding Alot of Lines



I like to take my v-tool and cut the first lines that go out the ruffles in the feather, that way the angles are somewhat the same. Then start continuing with the rest of the lines.

Step 7: Painting



I use acrylic paints. The brown i had water down a lot. it was very runny because i didn't want it dark brown. The white i also diluted but not as much as the brown. The yellow was even less, maybe 50/50 with water. the black i used undiluted and just took a toothpick to put a spot on it.

Smoothly Carved Boomerang



All you need:

- pocket saw
- grafting wax
- polyurethane glue
- manual saw

- vice
- plane (electric is highly recommended)
- jigsaw
- sander
- sanding paper (from 80 to 600)
- safety gloves, goggles & ear plugs
- natural oil

Step 1: Find a Natural Elbow

First approach: 'I'll go out for a ride and I'll see what I'll find'. Not bad at all, go sniffing in the bushes and I'm sure you'll find something.

Second approach: choose your wood species, find the right trees and check them for elbows. If you're looking for Sequoia-stuff you'll need a telescope and some climbing equipment. The advantage of Olive is that it's a small species with lots of potential booms easy reachable from the ground.

If you've got the chance to find a dead tree you can skip the next step.

Look for branches with a diameter of 10 cm (3 inches) more or less. The more it's curved,

the better. Cut the branch with your pocket saw, cut the elbow from the branch and hide the waste-wood – or take it all with you. Don't forget to put some grafting wax on the wound you've left.

Step 2: Let It Dry



Fresh wood is not suitable to handle directly. You've got to dry it, of course. To fasten this process I usually peel off the bark with a knife and seal both ends of the elbow with polyurethane-glue. You can also use candle wax. This prevents the wood from drying too fast and cracking. Give it some time – one year is perfect – and store it in a well ventilated place. Do not put it in direct sunlight or on a radiator. The slower it dries, the better.

Note: two different elbows are shown in the pictures. One peeled, one not.

Step 3: Preparing the Elbow



Our elbow is finally dry and we're ready to go. It doesn't look very well yet, but inside this piece of wood three boomerangs are hidden. Before going to slice the elbow into pieces we have to prepare it, this means that we're going to plane it to have a flat surface on both sides with a thickness that's almost the same everywhere. Use an electric plane and don't forget safety gloves, goggles & ear-plugs.

Step 4: Slicing



The bigger the diameter of the elbow, the more slices you can make of it. I usually try to saw boards of 1 cm thick (1/3 inch). Secure the elbow in a vice and slice it with a manual saw. I don't recommend electric saws. Circular saws are too difficult to handle, too dangerous as well and I don't have great souvenirs from jigsaws. A good old well-cutting saw will do the job very fine. In this phase you'll be submerged in the wood smell. Every species has its own flavor, but I'm sure there's nothing better than the smell of fresh cut Olive-wood: a mixture of grapes and cherries!

Step 5: Designing



Now you've got at least one slice from your elbow, time for the real work. You don't have to think a lot, the tree has done this job for you. Look accurately at the wood structure and benefit from the possibilities it gives you. Let your imagination go, draw some basic lines and get back to work. Never forget: the tree shaped your boomerang, all you do is fine-tuning its job.

Step 6: Shaping



In this phase you're using sander, jigsaw and plane. To remove small sections you can use the sander (I fixed mine in a vice). For the rest you can use the jigsaw. During this step you can always adjust the shape of your boom (first I wanted to make an asymmetrical boomerang but I changed my mind and went for a pure traditional shape).

Optional: When this shaping is done you can pay attention to the thickness (I always make my boomerangs thicker in the middle). Use a plane for this.

Step 7: Profiling - Basic Boomerang Aerodynamics

Back to the table. A boomerang is a set of wings put together in a certain way. Wings are profiled, and flattened towards their ends. To understand why and how boomerangs behave, you've got to know some basic principles.

Boomerangs do not just go away and come back. The main reason they do so is that they turn very fast around their axe after being thrown. While throwing a boomerang the right way, you're giving it the necessary rotation. This movement is counterclockwise (for a right-handed boomerang), the leading edges (steep wing-sides) cutting the air, just like airplanes, birds etc. The rotation gives them uplift, and the setting of the wings causes a spin. This spin forces the missile to flow not just right away. Translated: your rocket is coming back home. Get these basics in mind while setting the profile or download the picture. This drawing-thing isn't exact science, sanding and feeling will do the rest.

Shaping the profiles is sanding, sanding and especially sanding: heavy (electric) sanding with coarse grain at the beginning and manual sanding with finer grains to finish. This phase is pure instinctive, so try to make the best wing-profiles you can get. And take your time.

Note: I never throw away the sawdust and woodchips because it's perfect stuff to smoke fish.

Step 8: Oiling



Your boomerang is almost finished now. All you have to do yet is giving it some protection. Some prefer varnish, others epoxy... I prefer natural oil. Nothing is more exciting than putting the oil on your hands, warming it up and giving the fresh made boomerang its first massage. Rub away the oil excess with a piece of cloth and give it a second treatment the day after.

Step 9: Throwing!

Throwing!

Your boomerang is finished, ready to give it its first flight?