



An 8-bowe spiral braid

This braid uses 8 loops, filling both hands. It produces a lovely spiral, looking like a twined cord but much stronger.

Put four loops of one color on your left hand, on A, B, C, and D (index, middle, ring, and pinkie fingers). Put four loops of a different color on ABCD R (right). Fasten the end of the bundle to something you can pull on (ie, a table leg, your foot) with a tie cord.

Do an exchange, D R with A L (right pinkie trades with left index).

Hands apart - spread hands until the braid tightens at the crossing point.

Now exchange C R with B L (ring with middle). B R with C L (middle with ring). A R with D L (index with pinkie). Tighten (hands apart) after each exchange.

When you've exchanged each loop (4 exchanges), start over - D R to A L.



Tips: Hold the loops (bowes) on your outermost knuckles (crook fingers slightly to hold them - keep the tension firm). To exchange, stick one finger deeply through the loop on the other, drop off the outer loop on the second knuckle, pick up the inner loop (that your finger didn't go through) on the now unoccupied finger.

Keep tension firm (sit back from your tie point) - loose loops fall off fingers much more easily.

The strength with which you pull in "hands apart" will dictate the tightness of your braid - don't yank, but pull smoothly and firmly. A harder pull makes a smoother, tighter, stiffer cord; a gentle pull makes a softer, more flexible cord. No pulling (not doing hands apart) makes a mess - no visible pattern, just random loops of cord. Do hands apart after each exchange.

Try different color arrangements - not just one color per hand.

Lark's head knots are very useful for fastening the ends for braiding.

Fingerloop.org, stringpage.com/braid/fl/fingerloop.html, loopbraider.com



A 5-bowe square braid

This makes a squarish braid with alternate diagonals (chevrons) of each color.

Put three loops on your left hand, on A, B, and C (index, middle, and ring fingers); put two on your right hand, on B and C (middle and ring fingers).

With A R(right) (the finger that doesn't have a loop), reach through the two loops on that hand on B and C and pick up the bottom loop on the left hand; pick it up by the bottom strand of the loop (called reversed). Pull it back through B and C (using your thumb if necessary) and put it firmly on A R.

Move the loops on the left hand down; the one that was on B goes down to C, the one that was on A goes down to B. Now you have three loops on your right hand and two on your left. Hands apart.

With the unoccupied finger (A L), reach through B and C on that hand to pick up C on the right hand (from the bottom of the loop). Move the loops down on the right hand, and do it again.



5-bowe, variation

This braid is interesting because the manipulation is almost identical to the square braid above, but you get two thin braids at once. You can work these two braids together to make a cord with slits in it for fastening things through. The only difference in the instructions is that for this braid, instead of taking the bottom strand of the bottom loop each time, you will take the same loop by the top strand (so it doesn't flip over as it changes hands).

Loops on ABC L and BC R.

A R reach through BC R and pick up C L by the top strand (unreversed). Put it on A R.

Walk the loops on your left hand down one. Hands apart.

A L reach through BC L, pick up C R by the top strand.

Walk the loops on R down; repeat until done.



Setting Up the Braid

Measure out the length of thread you want - you need twice the length of the finished piece, plus about a third of the finished length for take-up, plus about 6 inches for the knot at the beginning and the unbraidable loops at the end (multiply the finished length by 1.2 or 1-1/3 (larger numbers for thicker threads), add 6 inches, and double it). For a basic braid, don't make the thread longer than your arms' spread. Repeat that length for the number of loops you need for this braid, in the appropriate colors.

When you've measured and cut your threads, you need to fasten them in a loop. First smooth the threads so they're reasonably untangled and stretched the same; lay all the ends together, give the newly-formed loops a pull just to make sure they're the same length, then tie the ends into an overhand knot. Note that the first few exchanges will be a little muddled, before the loops get straightened out; when you're finished, you can reknit a little higher and cut off the muddled bit if you think it looks bad.



Fasten the knotted end to something you can pull against, like a table or your foot (lark's head knots are very useful), then put one loop on each finger. Your fingers are labeled A (index), B (middle), C (ring), and D (pinkie) on each hand. For eight loops (or bowes, as you'll often see them called), you'll put loops on A, B, C and D on each hand, one color per hand. Put the loops at your first knuckle, and crook your fingers a little to hold them. Back up until the threads are stretched out firmly but not tautly between your hands and the fastening. Now you can begin to braid.

Finishing Off

When you've braided the length you want, or when the loops get too small for easy manipulation, it's time to finish off - which is very simple. Pull your fingers out of the loops and tie an overhand knot as close to the braided area as you can manage. Cut off the excess loops, and you have a finished braid. If you don't want knots – the braids stay together pretty well without fastening, though they'll eventually unravel; you can also do a wrapped finish to reinforce the ends.



Working Longer Braids

Basic braids are limited by the length of your arms. There are various tricks to get around this limitation.

- 1) Get a partner. Have someone sit near the tied end of the braid; at each "hands apart", they should tap between the loops to tighten the braid. Simple - if you can find someone willing to sit there long enough.
- 2) Do your own tapping - if you're flexible enough, you can tap to tighten with your foot, until the unbraided loops are short enough for hands apart to deal with them. You will probably have some variation in tightness; it works itself out over time, to end up even.
- 3) Half the braid - measure out your bowes, up to twice as long as you can braid. Separate the threads, and tie each bowe into a circle (make sure they're the same length). Lay them together with the knots at one end, and tie an overhand knot near the center of the length. Braid as if that was the end of your piece; when you've finished, untie the overhand knot, turn the



braid around, tie a new knot in the braided stuff, and braid the second set of loops. It will usually have a small mess at the point of turning; it's unlikely to be noticed unless you point it out, though. You can work a piece up to more than two yards long this way (combined with foot-tapping).

4) Loop the braids - set up your bowes, measure out loops as long as you can work, then loop-through-loop (like a crochet chain) to shorten the excess length. You'll have to gently pull the chained ends through each time you do an exchange. When you've braided enough that the loops are getting short, pull out part of (or all of) the chain and continue braiding. I find this more annoying than useful, trying to deal with the chained ends.

5) There are tools for tapping at a distance - pictures of medieval and Japanese braiders with benches or stands that let you pull or step on a string and a stick taps at the braid point. As far as I know there aren't any currently being made, though.



A Grain d'Orge of 6 Bowes

This makes a thick flat braid with the main color in two stripes on either side, with the other colors (from A and D) alternating in the center.

Place 1 bowe each of one color on BCR and BCL. Place a different colored bowe on DR. Place a different colored bowe on AL.

AR through BCR take CL reversed (from the bottom).

Walk down BL to CL.

BL through CL take CR reversed.

Walk down R bowes.

AL exchange with DR.

Repeat.



A Lace Maskel

This makes an open sequence of small braids crossing -