“Why should woodturners learn to use and ride the bevel of a roughing gouge, a parting tool, a spindle gouge, and a skew chisel when most turners simply want to make bowls and have no desire [to] turn spindles? Simply put, learning how to ride the bevel is a safe, efficient method to improve all aspects of woodturning. The skills learned while spindle turning are easily transferred to bowl turning.”¹

“I have yet to meet a woodturner whose skills weren't improved from learning to use a skew chisel. The skew teaches how wood is cut, and it teaches the importance of the bevel better than any other turning tool. Learning those two lessons will make anyone a more skillful woodturner, regardless of the kind of turning. In addition, the skew leaves the smoothest surface of any turning tool, and a sharp skew makes clean cuts easily in the most challenging of wood-grain patterns – more so than any other turning tool.”²

Spindle turning is turning wood with its grain parallel to the lathe beds, the wood is usually held between centers. Cuts are made parallel to the bed or down hill, never uphill.

“The cutting edge of the skew chisel must be sharp. Everything else is a personal preference.”³ Skews coming in various shapes. The blade is usually rectangular or oval in shape. Mine are rectangular. I have used an oval one once. In my opinion, a turner could become familiar with, and do well with, either shape. I do have a preference regarding the shape of the cutting edge. The straight edge is easier

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1 Russ Fairfield, *Riding the Bevel*, in American Woodturner February 2011 Vol 26, no 1, p. 18
2 Russ Fairfield, *Humanizing the Skew Chisel*, in American Woodturner October 2010 Vol 25, no 5, p. 32
3 Ibid
to sharpen but, in my opinion, it is not as versatile as a curved cutting edge. A jig is recommended for sharpening a curved edge.

![Straight Skew](image1.png)

**Curved skew:** beginning with the toe (long point) grind a fairly straight section, than increase the curve to the heel (the short point).

![The skew angle is 20 degrees.](image2.png)

![The skew angle is 30 degrees.](image3.png)

(The shapes and angles shown above are suggested starting points.  
(When cutting with a skew use the bottom half of the cutting edge, that is, the half that is closest to the tool rest.)

A word of warning: there are reports, believed by some, that the skew has a mind of its own, that it is impish and, at times, is outright destructive. From my own experience, I do believe that there is some truth to these reports. However, the skew may be tamed. Russ Fairfield offers this suggestion for beginners or anyone who might like to get a new start with their skew chisels. I've tried it and also recommend it.

Turning with a skew is not much different than carving. Mount a 4 inches piece of a large carrot between centers. With the lathe off place the skew on the tool rest so that the bevel rests on the center of the carrot, pointing either towards the headstock or the tailstock with the toe (long point) up. Slide the skew along as you lift the handle so that the cutting edge peels a small slice of carrot from the center towards the end of the carrot. The tool rest may need to be adjusted up or down so that your hold on the tool is comfortable as you guide the tool. Make a cut in the opposite direction. Repeat, this time with the toe down. As with most cuts make the cut with your body not your arms or hands. Your hands and arms are used to guide the tool. Learn to dance with the lathe. Spread your feet apart. The cut is made as you shift your weight from one foot to the other.

Now do exactly the same thing with the lathe running at 100 rpms or on the slowest setting for your lathe.

A carrot is great for horizontal, straight cuts but what about curves, like the outside of a sphere? How
about a turnip or a rutabaga. Again, take your time, start in the center, working towards the ends, moving down hill, using light cuts, and work through this first with the lathe off. Pay attention to what has to be done with the handle of the tool to make this curved cut while maintaining bevel contact on the turnip and keeping the tool on the tool rest. Also, keep in mind that you should move the tool though the cut using your body. Spread your feet apart and move by shifting your weight from one foot to the other. This is the dance. Use your hands and arms only to keep the bevel rubbing and the edge cutting.

Check out [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XMBbYM11I8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XMBbYM11I8) for an interesting variation on this.

We have mentioned the **flat cut** (the carrot) and the **round cut** (the rutabaga). What else is there? The “**V**” cut. The toe of the skew is used, primarily, because it is easier to observe as the cut is being made. Simply scribe a shallow groove, then slice off a thin slice of wood on first one side than the other until the depth and wide is what you want. **Peeling cut.** This is a similar to a parting cut, and is easier to do with the straight section of the curved skew. This cut is made at either end of the wood or at a point where the diameter of the wood varies. Lay the tool flat on the tool rest and peel the wood away by placing the bevel part way up the wood then lift the handle to engage the cutting edge. The cutting edge should fall in towards the center of the wood in an arch. **Facing cut.** This cut is perpendicular to the grain, the ends of the wooden piece are good examples of where this cut might be used. Use the point of the toe. Cut a thin slice. Sight along the bevel that is in contact with the wood, this will show you the direction in which the tool is cutting. (This cut does not need to be perpendicular. This is basically the same cut one uses for the V cut.)

You should find that there are a number of variation to these basic cuts. Before attempting them I suggest that you turn the lathe off and walk yourself through the cut a couple of time. Then turn the lathe on, use a moderate slow speed (750 - 1000 rpms or so), place your skew on the tool rest, rest the bevel on the turning wood, then lift the handle to begin the cut.

A **pivoting peeling cut**? I used this cut to form the nose of the buoy as well on many other projects. I just roll the straight section of the curved skew into the wood. This is a peeling cut but instead of continuing with a flat peeling cut, such as when forming a tenon, the skew is pivoted on the tool rest so that the toe cuts down into the wood, while the handle is lifted up. This cut is complex in that while the tool is pivoted the bevel must be “rubbing”. In a cut one might move the skew from being parallel to the grain to being perpendicular to the grain. The handle must also be moved horizontally throughout the cut. This cut will remove wood quickly even in the middle of your piece, not just at the end, such a when forming a tenon. Also, a round cut might be started with the pivoting peeling cut. Just be watchful of the heel. Let just say exciting things happen if you catch the heel, so practice this slowly.

These cuts do not need to be rushed or hurried. This is true especially of the final cut. A sharp skew will give you a wonderful smooth surface. Slide the cutting edge into the wood smoothly.

**Practice** will not necessarily make you a better turner. Practice does not make perfect, it makes permanent. Only perfect practice makes perfect. Watch what you are doing. Watch what is happening to the wood as the tool is cutting into it. Do the dance (shift your weight). Use your hands and arms only to pivot the tool or move the handle so as to keep the bevel rubbing.

Lastly, **can the skew be used in bowl turning?** Yes, I am going to suggest one way it can be used.
Something referred to as a “reverse-angle scrapper” or “Hardwood scrapper” or “negative rake scrapper” is what your skew is if it is used to scrap the wood with just the cutting edge. The sharper the better. This works well on end-grain, difficult grainy wood, and hard hardwood. Both straight and curved skews work well on the outside of the bowl but only the curved skew fits into the inside of your vessel. Light cuts are called for, be patient. You should get fine angel hair shavings. Moderately slow speeds to very slow speeds are recommended until you have gained some experience.

Is production turning for you? We have discussed tops, and other toys or projects might be something that would work for you. Consider setting a goal of 12, or 50 or 100 items. Organize the project so that you cut all the blanks, do all the center marking, if needed, place the blanks and tools within reaching distance, and get to work. This might be likened to a musician repeatedly practicing scales or some other exercise. Take your time, think through your cuts, then cut smoothly. While this is not a perfect example, a musician who only plays through a piece once will not master the music. For most of us mastery of a tool or of a cut come only after much good practice. I highly recommend doing a batch of – something – rather than just making one item.

This paper is a simple summary. It is my hope that it might be of some use in jogging your memory as to what we covered this evening, and might give a little boast to your confidence so that you will take a step into the great big world of spindle turning.

Markers: (I use these on my tops.)

I have tried several brands of markers for coloring the tops. I like these the best. I purchased them through Packard Woodworks. On line or in their catalog look under “Surface Decoration” and find “Duel Brush Pens”. (1-800-683-8876 or packardwoodworks.com)

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