Vince Pitelka, 2016

Critical Points in Throwing

There are lots of steps to keep track of in learning to throw, so go over these points frequently.

Prepare Clay Properly: Wedge clay thoroughly before throwing. Don't waste time on clay that is too wet or too dry. Sloppy-wet clay must be air-stiffened before use. Stiff clay can be draped with soaking-wet rags and left overnight in a plastic bag or bucket. Do not reuse clay from a previous pot that didn't work out until you stiffen and re-wedge it. If you have some too-stiff clay and some too-soft clay, use the stack-and-slam wedging method to combine them.

Prepare Plenty of Clay: Avoid attitude of preciousness of each pot by starting with at least a dozen balls of clay. For practice centering and making cylinders, make balls the size of a small apple, about one pound. If a pot isn't working out, don't waste time trying to save it. Start another one.

Clean the Wheelhead or Bat: Ideal surface for receiving clay is slightly damp but not wet. Scrape and squeegee with rubber rib to remove clay residue and wipe with rag.

Slap-Center: Before applying water, slap center a ball of properly prepared clay on the wheelhead or bat and seal down lower edges.

Correct Body Position for Centering the Clay: Get up-close and personal with the splash pan, sitting as close to wheelhead as possible. Anchor elbows securely against torso or thighs or locked in crook of torso and thigh. Make sure that when your hands are in proper position in contact with clay lump and your elbows anchored, you can still apply more force by rolling your hips forward or swiveling upper torso to the left.

Centering requires full body control rather than muscular strength. Hold hands in hand-shaking position but with base of palms pressed together, left hand slightly higher than right, so that the two hands are working as a single unit. Primary centering pressure is applied with right hand bent back so that the base of the palm presses straight into the lump when you roll your hips forward. The left thumb should lie across the lump, pressing down as you roll your hips forward or swivel your upper torso to the left to apply pressure horizontally against the lump with your right palm. *Keep the base of your palms pressed together!* The fingers of each hand can wrap loosely around the lump, but don't close the upper edges of your hands against the clay, and don't squeeze the clay while centering. Don't press your hands down against the wheelhead. Aside from the left thumb, centering involves pressure across the wheelhead, not down against it.

Avoid Touching the Clay When the Wheel Isn't Turning: Except for slap centering, always start the wheel before applying pressure, and always remove pressure before stopping the wheel.

Aggressive Commanding Approach: Clay appreciates a vigorous commanding approach with an economy of motion. Be clear about the specific reason for whatever you do, and remember that an aggressive, adventurous approach teaches you much more quickly. Take chances.

Concentration of Pressure Points: Concentrating force on a small area of clay gives greater control than broad application of pressure over a large area. Centering primarily involves pressure with the base of the right palm. Lifting walls involves pressure with slightly bent fingertips rather than the flats of the fingers or hand. Once you have a basic vessel, don't use the broad surface of your hand for any shaping task. If you want to smooth or flatten a broad area, use a rib.

Work on the Right-Hand Side of the Wheel: After centering always work at the right-hand side of the wheel where the clay is moving ***away*** from your hands.

Work at the Correct Speed: Use high speed for centering, wheel-wedging, and penetrating the lump of clay. Use medium speed for widening the bottom, lifting the walls, and finishing small vessels. Use slow speed for large vessels.

When Lifting the Walls, coordinate wheel speed to lifting speed. If you are leaving a bold, steep throwing spiral, then you are lifting too quickly in proportion to the wheel speed. You should be lifting slowly enough in proportion to wheel speed to leave a barely perceptible throwing spiral.

Lubrication: While throwing, keep the clay lubricated with water adequately at all times. Excess friction is your enemy. But remember that water is continuously absorbed into the clay and decreases structural stability. As you practice throwing, try to work *fast* in order to minimize absorption.

Remove Excess Water: Remove excess water whenever possible and as soon as possible. If you work slowly and a piece begins to soften you may remove excess water and slurry with sponges and ribs. When you reach an approximation of the desired shape you may remove all excess water, and do final shaping with fingers, damp sponges, throwing stick (jug finger), or ribs (rubber, plastic, metal, or wood).

Attention to Rims: When lifting walls stop just short of the rim. Compress rim regularly, and on cylinder-based forms keep rim diameter equal to or smaller than base until wall height is established.

Cutting Off the Pot and Finishing the Bottom: These details can make or break an otherwise good pot. Always bevel the lower edge inwards before cutting the pot off the wheel, or on cylindrical pieces plan to do a rolled edge. Never leave a sharp outward flare at the bottom, because it will greatly complicate removing the piece from the wheelhead or bat. When cutting off a pot, hold the cutoff wire very taught, press the wire against the wheel with fingers or thumbs, and get accustom to cutting-off with the wheel turning to keep the cutoff wire from climbing up into the base of the pot. Trim or otherwise finish the bottom carefully, and make sure that there is some sort of trimmed or rolled bevel or undercut to create a line of shadow around the base, separating it from the surface upon which it sits.

Stamp or Sign Everything You Make: Unsigned/unstamped pots will not receive credit.