

# “I Wanna Learn Rug Hooking!”

## An Easy Cheat Instructional

Created by Melanie Pinney and American Pie Designs

How many times have you heard someone say they would love to learn rug hooking? Have you seen beautiful rugs and wished you could make one of your own? You'll be reassured to know there's no right or wrong way to hook a rug. However, there are many styles, supplies and equipment to choose from that can confuse a beginner, so let's make this easy!



*“Chairman Meow” by  
Melanie Pinney and American Pie Designs*

## First, Let's Choose a Foundation (Backing) Cloth:

I'll admit choosing the backing for your rug hooking project can be daunting. Rug hookers use all types of backing materials with names like burlap, Scottish burlap, monks cloth, linen and rug warp. To further complicate things, some terms used to describe the backing materials are used interchangeably. I didn't know what all those names meant and I didn't want to make any mistakes! In addition, I was also confused by the multitude of colors that backings come in, such as bleached, natural and unbleached. I worried I might not be using the "right" backing and my work would look amateurish.

So, I scoured the internet and books on rug hooking, ran polls on Facebook, and even emailed rug designers to ask what everyone was using. Do you know what I found? *There's no right answer!* That's right, you're not doing anything wrong by picking monks cloth over linen, or picking rug warp over Scottish burlap. There are pros and cons to each type of backing, including how much you invest and where you intend to display your finished piece, but there are no hard and fast "rules"!

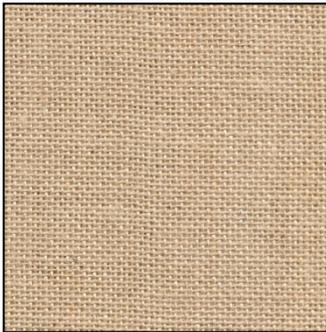


*Scottish Burlap in Tan and Gray (Foreground) and 100% Linen (Background)*

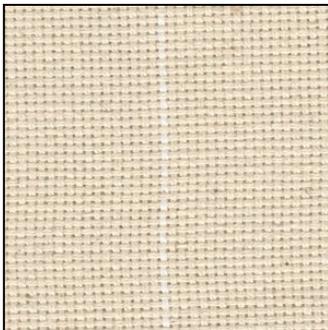
So where do you begin? How do you choose? Let's take a look at the good, the bad and the ugly of the most popular types of backing for your hooked rug:



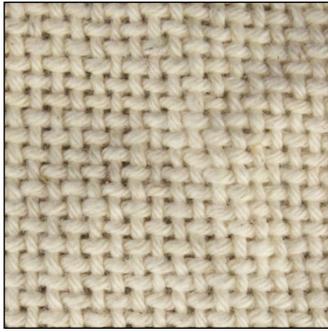
Burlap, Natural Burlap, Angus Burlap, Root Ball Burlap: Many rug hookers begin with this type of backing because it is inexpensive (about \$3 to \$6 a yard) and can be found at Walmart and other department stores. It is made from jute and is nearly identical to that used for feed sacks. Burlap is often used for primitive hooking (meaning, hooking with wool strips that are at least 1/4" wide). It is coarse and rough, and the threads, sizing, spacing and coloration are often irregular.



Scotch Burlap, Scottish Burlap, Premium Scottish Burlap: Also made from jute but much better quality than angus or root ball burlap, this backing is usually available in 48" and 60" widths and is easy to use and economical (approximately \$15 to \$17 a yard for 60" widths). The threads are pretty much uniform and it is a stable backing. This backing is popular with rug hookers and works well for primitive hooking (hooking with wool strips that are at least 1/4" wide), is rough to the feel and "sheds" little fibers. It comes in colors ranging from light tan to off-white and gray. If you are confused as to whether you are getting Scottish burlap, ask your supplier about the feel and texture of the backing--it should be somewhat rough to the feel and "shed" little fibers.



Monks Cloth: Made of cotton, this backing is popular with rug hookers because it is good quality and economical. It stretches more than burlap, so you can pull it tight across your rug hooking frame. It is stronger and more durable than burlap, and it is soft and pliable. It has an even weave and is available in widths from 72" to 144". It does not "shed" little fibers as you work. Unfortunately, huck weaving cloth is sometimes sold as monks cloth, but you can tell the difference by the "grid" thread woven at regular intervals in monks cloth (see the white line woven into the monks cloth in the photo?). With monks cloth, it is essential to give your piece a good iron steaming when finished so it lays flat, particularly if you pack your hooking a little tight. You can use monk's cloth for fine or primitive hooking and it sells for approximately \$15 to \$17 a yard.



Rug Warp, Rug Warp Cloth: Woven with single strands of tightly twisted 100% cotton, it resembles woven string. Rug warp is one of the heaviest backings available for rug hooking, which can be a disadvantage, especially when working on a large piece. However, it enables you to hook with both wide and narrow strips of wool or yarn, and suppliers state it allows you to hook without skipping spaces. Although heavy, rug warp is a good quality backing and exceptionally strong. Some rug hookers prefer the weight, as they claim it won't allow their rugs to buckle or ripple. Rug warp usually comes in 60" widths for about \$20 a yard.



Linen, Scottish Linen, Natural Linen: Linen is the most expensive of backing fabrics and can be found bleached (off-white) and unbleached (tan or grayish). It is usually sold in 60" widths for \$25 to \$27 a yard. It is an even-weave material that enables you to hook with both wide and narrow strips of wool. It is very strong, soft, flexible and easy to work with. You will notice a quality difference immediately if you place it against Scottish burlap, and many rug hookers refuse to hook on anything but linen. Most experienced rug hookers claim it will outlast other backings. Good quality linen is very soft, does not shed much and has a slight "sheen" to it (if your linen is not soft and relatively smooth, you may have received an inferior sample or your supplier has it confused with Scottish burlap). Linen can "beard", meaning small fibers may poke to the top of your work while hooking, which is especially noticeable when hooking with darker wools. These fibers may be simply trimmed with scissors or picked off with a pair of tweezers. Do not store linen folded, as folds can weaken and split the fibers over a period of time (it is best to roll it on a tube for storage).

## Transferring Your Design Onto Foundation:

Many rug hooking patterns arrive already pre-drawn on the foundation cloth (monks cloth, linen, etc). However, some patterns come drawn on paper, or you might want to draw your own design and transfer it to your foundation. Here are two easy ways to transfer a pattern onto your foundation material:

The first is what I call the [“Cheap” Light Transfer Method]. Simply tape your pattern template over a light source, such as a window with the sun behind it. You can also tape it over a piece of clear glass, Plexiglass® or other type of clear surface such as a glass table. Shine a high intensity lamp underneath, or remove the shade from an old lamp and put it behind the glass or plastic. Tape your foundation cloth over the paper template, being careful to line the pattern up with the grain of the fabric, if applicable. Trace the pattern onto the cloth with a fine black Sharpie® marker.

The second method is called the [Red Dot Transfer Fabric Method]. Red dot transfer fabric is a thin, translucent, gauzy fabric you can find in fabric stores or on the internet. It has a grid of red dots to make it easier to align it with the grain of your cloth. First, place your red dot fabric over the pattern template and trace it with a soft pencil. Then align the red dot fabric over your cloth and re-trace over the pencil lines with a fine black Sharpie® marker. The marker will transfer through the red dot fabric onto the cloth!

## Frame or No Frame?

In the eastern part of the United States, it's not uncommon to find rug hookers who hook "Nantucket Style" with wool yarn rather than strips and a punch needle rather than a hook. They complete beautiful (and very large) rugs with this method without using a frame, by simply draping the rug across their laps. This method is very mobile, allowing them to take their projects with them anywhere, and they do not have the expense of buying a frame. However, if you want to do "traditional" rug hooking with a hook and wool strips instead of yarn, you need a frame to stretch your backing and hold it taut while you work.

I first heard of rug hookers who used an embroidery hoop to hold their rug backing, so I thought I'd save a few dollars and give that method a try. In fact, the first rug hooking "beginner" kit I bought at a local store encouraged me to use a quilting hoop to hold the backing. Although I finished my first couple of rugs using a quilting hoop, it was an awkward method, since the hoop had to be squished between my belly and a table top in

order to leave my hands free for hooking. Also, I was constantly re-stretching and pulling the backing tight inside the hoop. Uh, *no-no*.

When looking at rug frames, you might be overwhelmed by your choices. I spent a good deal of time on the internet looking at customer reviews and hooking blogs and finally purchased a solid oak floor frame that is beautiful enough to be handed down through my family. You can invest less than \$100 on a good working frame or as much as \$1,000, depending on how many moving parts it has and how much you use it. Beginners won't go wrong with a simple lap model, and you can always move up to bigger and better models as you develop your rug hooking skills. Below are examples of three different types of frames, but remember there are almost unlimited styles and brands to choose from. Before making a large investment, I recommend you scour the internet and see what is offered, and you might also contact some of the manufacturers to personally discuss their products.



*Deluxe Rug Hooking Lap Frame*



*Floor Frame by K's Creation*



*Swivel-and-Sit Frame by Searsport*

### It's all in the Hook:

As with rug hooking frames, hooks come in almost unlimited sizes and styles, from bent hooks to ergonomic, with hardwood handles to plastic. Below are examples of my three favorite hooks, particularly because I love the beautiful handles coupled with brass:



*Hartman Hook with Ball Handle*



*Hartman Hook, Ergo Handle*



*Bent Hook, The Dorr Mill Store*

I consistently hook with 1/4" wide wool strips, so I don't need a variety of hook sizes to complete my projects. However, depending on the size of wool strips you are working with, you may want to invest in more than one hook. If you are a beginner and are hooking with approximately 1/4" wide strips, you should consider purchasing an 8mm size hook. Rug hookers who do fine shading with very skinny strips of wool use 2mm to 5mm hooks, and very primitive hookers who use wide strips of wool often choose a 9mm shank. Here is a chart to help you in choosing your hook sizes:

2mm (extra fine shank) is for very fine hooking (1/6" wool strips)
3mm (fine shank) is for 1/8" wool strips (which are called a #2 or #4 cut)
5mm (medium shank) is for 3/16" wool strips (called a #5 or #6 cut)
8mm (coarse shank) is for 1/4" wool strips (called #7, #8, #9 or #10 cuts)
9mm (extra coarse shank) is for 5/16" or hand-torn strips

### Cuts of Wool (and All Things Wooly):

Rug hookers get their wool from all kinds of places. They buy it ready-made on the bolt at fabric stores, they purchase it hand-dyed wool from suppliers, and they even use recycled wool from clothing. If you have hooked any length of time, you know that the exact combinations of dyes used for a particular color of wool are closely-guarded secrets called "dye recipes." It is important to follow these dye recipes each time for consistent results.

You also probably know that hand-dyed wool can run \$50 to \$90 a yard. That may sound expensive, but you have to take into consideration that hand-dyed wool is labor-intensive, not to mention the cost of the blank wool and the dyes.

With that type of investment, I know it is important that you receive good quality wool and consistent, brilliant colors that have depth and luminosity so your finished rug will be a wonderful representation of your hard work and creativity. All my wools at American Pie Designs are carefully hand-dyed, one small batch at a time, from vintage dye recipes that have been handed down for generations. I start with highest-quality heavyweight Dorr or Woolrich wools and the results are stunning!

When you buy my hand-dyed wool, it has already been "felted" so that the fibers bind together and it cannot fray. If you ever accidentally put a wool sweater through a washing machine, you have a good example of what felted wool looks like. To felt wool for rug hooking projects, it is run through hot water or dye, rinsed in cold, and then placed in a dryer on warm setting until it is dry and fluffy. The wool shrinks and the fibers bind together or "felt", and you can now cut the wool into strips without raveling or fraying.

What do you use to cut your wool into strips? If you are on a budget, you can use a good pair of scissors to cut your wool into strips. Another method is to cut your strips with a rotary cutter and mat from local fabric store. The superstar of all methods is to invest in a wool cutter. There are several brands on the market, including Fraser (Bliss), Townsend and Rigby strip cutters, to name just three. With a cutter, you simply feed a section of wool into the machine, crank the handle, and nice, even strips come out the other side. A good quality cutter will cost a minimum of \$300. In my opinion, the Bee Line Townsend cutter is definitely the "Cadillac" of cutters. You get what you pay for, so if you find one that sells brand new for less than \$200, chances are you won't be happy with the cutter. Of course, you can probably find an excellent used cutter for less than that on the internet.

What does the "cut" of your wool mean? The numbers assigned to wool strips refer to the width of the strip. A #2 cut is approximately 2/32-inch (or 1/16"). A #3 cut is 3/32-inch, and so on. Here's a handy chart to help you determine wool cuts:

#2 cut is approximately 2/32" (or 1/16" wide)
#3 cut is approximately 3/32" wide
#4 cut is approximately 4/32" (or 1/8" wide)
#5 cut is approximately 5/32" wide
#6 cut is approximately 6/32" wide
#7 cut is approximately 7/32" wide
#8 cut is approximately 8/32" (or 1/4" wide)
#9 cut is approximately 12/32" (or 3/8" wide)
#10 cut is approximately 16/32" (or 1/2" wide)

What cuts will you need for your style of rug hooking? If you are doing a traditional, finely shaded rug, you will use a #2, #3 or #4 cut. If you are creating a folk art-style rug, you will use a #4 up to a #8 cut strip. If you are creating a primitive-style rug, you would use #10, #11 or #12 cuts of wool.

What direction do you cut your wool? Wool strips are often cut lengthwise, following the direction of the selvage, and are usually 16 to 18 inches in length. However, this is an individual preference, and I often hook with strips as long as 26" to 28" in length.

### How Much Wool Do You Need?

One of the most difficult things about hooking is calculating how much wool you need. All kinds of things affect how much wool you will use, including how high your loops are and how close together you place them. But let's generalize and make things easy!

Let's say, for instance, you are hooking a big red apple. First, "square off" your apple, meaning measure it by multiplying its general rough width and length. In this case, our apple is roughly 6" wide by 6" high, or 36" squared off ( $6 \times 6 = 36$ ). Now, depending on the "cut" of wool you are hooking with (we learned about cuts in the previous section), multiply 36 by the corresponding number in the chart below:

<p>If you are using a #2, #3 or #4 cut, multiply the area by 4 If you are using a #5 or #6 cut, multiply the area by 5 If you are using a #7 or #8 cut, multiply the area by 6 If you are using a #9 or #10 cut, multiply the area by 8</p>
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In our example of the apple, if you are using a #8 cut (1/4" wide strips), you would multiply 36 by 6 to arrive at a total of 216 inches of wool to hook your apple ( $36 \times 6 = 216$ ).

We're almost finished, I promise. We know how many inches of wool it will take to hook our apple (216 inches), but how we know what this means in actual "yardage terms"? We'll use another handy little chart to find the yardage we need. These estimated measurements are based on wool that has been pre-washed, pre-shrunk and fully felted (meaning it's shrunk as much as it ever will). To be safe, I always calculate in a little more wool than I think I will need, especially if I am hooking a background. Most suppliers of hand-dyed wool sell it in quantities called "fat-eighths", "fat-quarters", "half-yard" or "full yard", and they measure (very roughly) as follows:

<p>A "fat-eighth" contains approximately 198 to 240 inches of useable wool A "fat-quarter" contains approximately 396 to 480 inches of useable wool A "half-yard" contains approximately 792 to 960 inches of useable wool A "full-yard" contains approximately 1,600 to 1,920 inches of useable wool</p>
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In our apple example, we know we need about 216 inches of wool. Based on the chart above, I would be sure to have a "fat-quarter" piece on hand to hook my apple!

### Let's Start Hooking!

There are hundreds of thousands of books and internet sites devoted to rug hooking, and although it's impossible to provide you with complete instruction in this booklet, I can give you a good starter course. There are lots of methods of rug hooking and none of them are "wrong", so remember my motto--*relax and enjoy yourself, since creating is part of the fun!*

First and foremost, always bring your "tails" to the top: The important rule about rug hooking is always bring the end of your strip (called the "tail") to the top of your rug. Don't leave a tail hanging on the back of your rug or it will pull out later. As long as you bring all the tails to the top of your rug, they will hold forever in place and never unravel.

Righties versus Lefties: If you are right-handed, your left hand will always hold the wool strip underneath the backing fabric and your right hand will always hold the hook on top of the fabric. If you are left-handed, reverse your hand positions with your right hand holding the wool strip underneath and your left hand holding the hook.

Let's begin! Hold the very end of a wool strip with whichever hand you are using underneath the fabric. With your free hand, poke your hook through a hole in backing and grab the end of the wool strip with the hook, bringing about an inch of it up through the backing to the top (as you pull the end of the strip to the top, keep a snug grip on the rest of the strip underneath). This is called the "beginning tail". With your other hand still holding the strip underneath, poke your hook down into the very next hole in the backing and grab the wool strip with your hook, bringing it an inch or so above the backing. With your hand underneath, pull on the wool strip back down to adjust the height of your loop. *Note, as you bring the loop up to the top of the fabric, pull it slightly back and away from yourself as it emerges from the hole. If you always pull your loops up and slightly away from yourself, you will not pull out your previous loops as you hook.*

Let's keep going! Insert your hook into the very next hole and pull up a second loop. The loops should sit up comfortably, resting on each other and covering the backing without being over-crowded. My general rule is hook two holes, skip a hole, hook two holes, skip a hole, and so on. Your goal is to have sufficient loops to hide the backing, but not overly crowd the loops or stress the backing. When you reach the end of a row, run out of wool or want to change colors, pull a loop through to the top and snip it off, leaving about an inch of tail sticking above the backing. This is called your "ending tail". When you are done hooking an area, trim all the beginning and ending tails to the height of your other loops. These tails will disappear among your loops and will be forever locked into place.

How high should your loops be? Generally, a good rule of thumb is the loop should be as high as the strip is wide, but that's just a guide. As you develop your own rug hooking style, your loops may be a bit shorter or longer than the width of your strips. Obviously, the goal is to maintain a fairly even loop height, but don't worry unnecessarily about this, because once your rug is steamed and pressed (which we'll cover later), your loops will appear nice and even. This is a very forgiving craft!

You will notice that hooking a straight line of loops is very easy to accomplish. When you want to hook a curved line or fill in an area, you'll find that some of the loops look a bit uneven or may lean slightly. Do not be concerned because adding surrounding loops will prop them up again. You can also coax an uncooperative loop into proper position with the tip of your scissors or rug hook.

### Is Your Rug Curly and Lumpy?

I remember hooking my first rug, and things weren't going so well. I tend to crowd my loops a bit, so when I removed my rug from the frame, it curled up in a sloppy roll and some sections appeared a bit lumpy. I thought my rug was a goner, but it still happily resides in my workroom to this day, and there's not a curl or a lump in sight. I've seen a lot of rug hookers skip the steaming and pressing step, which I believe detracts from their finished rug. It's easy to make your rug look uniform and even!

When your hooking is complete, remove your rug from the frame and place it face up on an ironing board or a firm, heat-resistant surface, such as a piece of plywood on the floor covered with an old blanket). Thoroughly wet an old towel with cold water and wring it out, leaving a good amount of water in the towel. I always use an old towel, as it might become stained. Place the wet towel over the top of your rug. With a hot iron, steam and apply pressure to your rug, one section at a time, until it is flat and the loops are uniform height. Be sure you do not put the iron directly against the rug, as the heat might burn or

discolor the wool. Also, try not to re-position the damp towel during the steaming process or the colors in the wool may transfer or bleed on each other. When you have finished pressing your design, place it on a flat surface and allow it to finish air-drying.

### Finishing Your Rug:

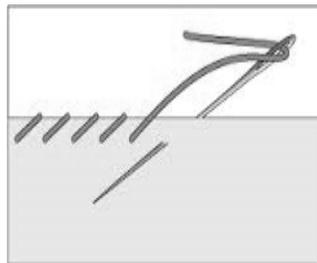
As with everything else about rug hooking, there are many ways to finish the edges. Whatever method you choose, it usually includes some sort of hand sewing, but you only need basic sewing skills to finish a rug quite beautifully (can you hold a needle and thread?). I'm going to cover two methods, the "Binding Tape Method" and the "Wool Strip or Yarn Whipstitch Method", and there are even tons of variations with these two methods, depending on the instructor. However, you've gotta' know my motto by now—*relax and enjoy yourself, since creating is part of the fun!*"

Binding Tape Method: Rug binding tape is a heavy, all-cotton strip that comes in many widths and colors. Some rug hookers attach the rug binding before they hook their rug and some attach it after. We're going to cover the latter method here.



Rug Binding

Place your rug face up on your worktable and lay the binding tape over the top of the leftover margin of your foundation backing, as close to your last row of hooking as possible. With a needle and heavy-duty thread, attach the binding to the foundation *right next to your last row of hooking* with a simple running whipstitch:



When you come to a corner, fold the binding tape at a 90 degree angle and continue stitching down that side. When you are finished, fold the binding edge to the back side of your rug and trim the excess foundation fabric back underneath your binding so it does not stick out past the edge of your binding. Now use a running whip stitch to attach the loose edge of the binding to the back of your rug. Don't stitch too tightly; just keep your binding as flat as possible. Re-steam your rug as shown above and let it dry, and your binding and the finished edge of your rug will look perfect!

Wool Strip or Yarn Whipstitch Method: This is my favorite method of finishing a rug, because I love that I can match the edging to my rug, and because the edge is rounded and gives a nice finish. Some rug hookers bind the edge of their rug with long strips of wool (about 30" long) cut into 1/4" (#8 cut) strips (you can use shorter strips; it just takes longer). Other rug hookers bind their rug with 100% wool yarn.

To begin, trim the excess foundation fabric so it is a width of 1-1/2" away from your last row of hooking. With the rug face up, fold the raw edge in half toward the good side of your last row of hooking and baste it in place with a needle and thread. Fold the margin in half again so it is right up against your last row of hooking, press it in place, and again baste it with a needle and thread. Thread a tapestry needle (or any needle with a large eye) with one of the long wool strips or with 100% wool yarn. Working from the top as close as possible to your last row of hooking, push your needle down through the rug and pull it through to the underside, leaving a short tail on top. Bring your needle back up over the edge of your rug and insert it back down through the rug to the underside again, being sure to hide the tail of the strip or yarn underneath your work. Repeat all along the edge of your rug, working each stitch from the top to the underside and maintaining fairly even stitches that lap over each other just slightly. If you are using wool strips, make sure the wool stays flat and does not twist as you work with it. When you reach a corner, you may need to work in the same hole a few times and use your fingers to spread your stitches out a bit to completely cover the backing material. Re-steam your rug as shown above and let it dry!

As They Used to Say, "That's All Folks!"

I hope this information makes your adventures into rug hooking enjoyable! If you would like to see examples of rug hooking, please visit me at <http://www.americanpiedesigns.com>, where I'm always cooking up new patterns and rug hooking designs.



*"Tropical Tango" by  
Melanie Pinney and American Pie Designs*

To see my line of yummy hand-dyed wools for rug hooking  
and wool applique, visit me at  
[www.americanpiedesigns.com](http://www.americanpiedesigns.com)

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