

The Knit and Tonic Long-Tail Provisional Cast On (Tutorial)

By Wendy Bernard



The provisional cast on is used whenever you want to create a starting point in your knitting from which you may decide to thread the needles through again and work in the opposite direction. Sometimes, people cast on provisionally if they think that the garment, when worked from the bottom up, might need to have some length added to it, or a special border, after the garment is completed. Other times, people cast on provisionally in places like the top of the shoulder when knitting from the top down, so those nasty top-of-the-shoulder seams won't mess up the look of the finished garment.

There are at least four or five ways to cast on provisionally, including simply casting onto a long stitch holder, which can work beautifully. Some people even cast on to a spare circular needle and let it hang while they work the piece. It is really up to you how you do it, but this long-tail version of the provisional cast on is the easiest and most convenient way I have found.

Some people say they can “unzip” the stitches when it is time to place the stitches back on the needles. I suggest you avoid attempting the feat because you don't want to lose all your hard work. Just carefully unravel and place the stitches back on the needle as you go.

This is how you do it:

1. The first thing you need to do is find some slippery yarn from an odd ball or just a length of yarn you can use for this purpose. Call it your “Waste Yarn” (My waste yarn is the yellow stuff).
2. Get your "Working Yarn" ready (My working yarn is the fuchsia stuff).

3. I'm assuming you know the long-tail cast on: Get ready for your long-tail cast on, but before you do that, make a slip knot with both of the yarns and place it onto your needle. You know, just make your slip-knot with both of the yarns side-by-side.



4. Then, set up for your long-tail cast on, but put the non-working--or waste yarn--over your thumb. The working yarn goes over the index finger.

5. Cast on, as usual, but notice as you do this that the waste yarn makes a nice chain at the bottom of your needle. If you make a working loop (one that sits over your needle) with your waste yarn, then you've made a mistake.



6. Before you cut the waste yarn, check and see that all the working yarn is looped on the needle and the waste yarn is "chained" below it. Count your stitches--but don't count the original slipknot for your final count. Cut your waste yarn, turn your work, and begin working your stitches as called for in the pattern. When you reach your slipknot, drop it. Let it hang while you knit.

7. When it's time to place the stitches you cast on provisionally, all you need to do is unravel the stitches and place them on your needle. Start from where you cast on. Slowly pull out the waste yarn to reveal your live stitches. Just note that if your first row called for fancy stitches, like yarn-overs and such, you'll need to take extra care when unraveling your provisional stitches.

How to get the Stitches back on the Needle

1. Recall that you made a slip knot with your waste yarn and working yarn and cast on stitches from there. Place your knitting on the table with the right side facing with the slipknot on your right.

2. Carefully untie the slipknot and begin to unravel the stitches. As you do this, you will see a loop of working yarn. That is your first stitch. Pluck out the waste yarn and place it on your needle.



3. Continue across all the stitches and pluck out the waste yarn as you go. I use the other side of my circular needle or a spare needle to do so.

4. If your waste yarn is nice and slippery and in a contrasting color, keep a pair of scissors nearby so you can carefully cut the waste yarn so it is a manageable length.



Some things I have learned about the Provisional Cast On:

The technique can be a crapshoot unless you understand what works for you. You just need to know that it is not a magic trick. The idea is to make sure that you have cast on correctly and to be calm when it is time to remove the stitches. I have also learned that if your first "real" knitted row is a fancy one, i.e., full of knits and purls and yarn-overs, that it is best to remember it when it's time to make the stitches live again.

And, if the idea of placing yarn-overs back on a needle is daunting, do yourself a favor and knit a plain row before you begin the pattern--and make note of it--so that when you make the stitches live again that you will have an easy time of it. What I mean is, once the knitted stitches are back on your needle, all you have to do is carefully tink back that row to reveal the fancy row below it. Then, off you go!

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