

Weaving cotton on a rigid heddle loom

A major difference in weaving with cotton rather than wool is managing tension. Cotton behaves differently to wool because it doesn't have any natural stretch. When we think about the triangles created by the moving shed positions, we know that the warp threads must be relaxed enough to extend to the longest diagonal position.

- Over tensioning is a common mistake and it is important to remember that the warp threads must be loose enough so that you can easily move the reed into each position without the warp threads being stretched. Remember “Be kind!” be kind to the loom, be kind to the yarns and be kind to yourself! This is particularly important when working with cotton because it is not as forgiving as wool.
- When moving the reed to the up position, lay the reed horizontally (towards you), place the reed ends in the up position slots on the side posts and then roll the reed up to the vertical position to avoid over-stretching the warp threads.
- Run the shuttle along the eyes of the reed because this is where the threads are the tightest so the shed will be the ‘cleanest’ to avoid catching any warp threads. In the up position this will be just under the eyes and in the down position it will be just above the eyes.
- Wind the weft threads on one side of the shuttle only so you have a straight edge to beat (push) the weft into place.
- Place the cotton weft thread gently with the reed, then change sheds and with the shuttle (before going through fully), beat the previous weft pick into place by pushing firmly with the shuttle edge. As the shed has been changed it will lock the previous weft pick in place.
- Splice to join weft threads to avoid double thickness. Wool is more forgiving and easier to hide joins so take a little more time with cotton.
- Regularly advance your warp so you are always weaving in the optimum spot, you may be tempted to weave as close to the reed as you can but this will affect your selvages (edges) as the warp will have to open at a greater angle which puts stress on the threads.
- Beat a balanced weave – the same number of weft picks as warp ends per 2.5cm (1in).