



KARA LEIGH FORD  
CERAMICS

My 7 Top  
Throwing Tips  
FOR POTTERS

[karaleighfordceramics.com](http://karaleighfordceramics.com)

As a big thank you for signing up to my newsletter I have written this little guide to help you with your throwing sessions,... and because I love you so much I have included an 8th \*bonus tip\*!

# Clay

## 1.

Choosing clay... is as important for technique as it is for aesthetics. Spend time trying out different clays for look as well as feel. It can have a big affect on how successful you are at the wheel. The clay you buy from the supplier might not be quite right- it may have the beautiful colour you are looking for but it might be a bit too stiff for throwing so be prepared to put some time into preparing your clay to get it the right consistency to throw with.

Consistency is key, if the clay you are working with is too soft it won't hold its shape for long and the water you add during throwing will weaken it and your form will likely collapse. Likewise, if your clay is too hard- you may struggle to centre it, the forces you'll need will be much greater, and you may push it off the wheel head. You'll also get tired and likely frustrated that it's taking so much effort to produce the shape you want.

I find with smaller forms like mugs, I like my clay to be a tad on the stiffer side but with larger shapes, wetter clay means less effort is needed. There's no right or wrong here, it's just depends on your preference and what you're most comfortable with. Be very mindful of how your clay feels today - it's easy to get despondent if your throwing session feels like hard work- ask yourself is the clay consistency right?

If your clay has been sat for a long time in a warm place it will lose water, even if it's in a plastic bag. My clay sits outside so can absorb additional water from the atmosphere meaning I'll have to bring it in a day or two before I want to use it so it's not too wet. For throwing you'll probably want to choose a clay without grog or fine grog - not too sharp or it will give you a free microdermabrasion.



# 2.

# elbows



Brace, brace!!!!' When throwing imagine you're in a plane crash (ha! Not really- but hopefully that will help you remember;-) if your elbows aren't braced against something- you're making everything 100x harder for yourself. I always have my left elbow braced against my left hip or my right resting on the splash pan. My elbows only become free once the clay is centred and most of the way to a pot being completed.

# wheels

# 3.

I get lots of questions about what wheel I use. I have two wheels in my studio, I have a Cowley Wheel circa 1980 which I have used for approx 12 years. And I also have a Skutt Professional Wheel.

The Cowley wheel has a seat attached. It's a bit of a 'JEEP' (just enough essential parts) it's about 30 years old- I bought it 2nd hand for £200 at the very start of my pottery adventure. When on, it sounds like a diesel train. The splash pan is cracked and leaky but we've been through a lot me and that wheel. My Skutt Professional is exactly that, it's a professional potter's wheel built to last, I love the huge wheel head and big cast metal splash pan. It's much quieter and has enough taulk to pull a small car (well, almost ;-)

I have a wooden batt system which fits on my wheels with batt pins. I have big batts for plates and large forms and I have a 'mother' batt which smaller batts fit into.

Batts are great because you're much less likely

to ruin your pot when taking it off the wheel- it also speeds up production massively. I find them much easier than ware boards (which I don't have room for in my tiny studio anyway) and means I can move pots around easily without fear of squashing them.

If you are thinking about investing in a wheel- go and try a few out. It's often quite a big spend so anyone selling wheels won't mind you asking to do this (as long as you don't try and make a dinner set whilst you are there!) See how comfy they are, take note of your body position, is it comfy, and how natural it feels to sit at- any sign of stiffness or pain in your back and it might not be the right wheel for you.

It is worth noting that I sit on a cushion whilst throwing at my wheel as this helps me get my body in closer which in turn means I need to use less force. You might find that just raising your wheel off the floor by a few inches will mean that you are in a much better position. Try putting it on a low table or on blocks.

# enjoy

## 4. *the learning process*



How long does it take to throw a pot? A wise potter once told me... 'it takes 10 minutes and 30 years of practice to throw a good pot'.

Getting good is not a quick process. Throwing on the wheel is a bit like learning to drive - which on average that takes between 45 hours of lessons and 22 hours of practice to learn how to pass your driving test\* but that doesn't mean you are a good driver (the insurance quote of any 25 year old proves this!).

When learning to throw on the wheel you might be one of those annoying people who centres on their first try (NB: I was not one of those people) but the likelihood is you won't be, it will take time, patience and perseverance. Don't beat yourself up, give yourself the time to learn and enjoy the process.

\*According to the DVSA

Bare with me on this one...

When I was a teenager I learnt how to ride horses. Even though I wasn't a natural on horseback I had a great teacher who gave me confidence to keep going. I feel like there are a lot of parallels with learning pottery and learning to ride. Clay is essentially a wild animal; you need to understand it's behaviour in order to work with it, not against it.

Granted, pottery is a bit safer than getting on the back of 17 hand thoroughbred but the disappointment felt when not achieving what you want can be equally as painful as falling off said thoroughbred.

## 5. *clay*

*is a bit like a horse*





My riding instructor taught me to always finish on a high. If I had just managed to get my pony (his name was Albany- if anyone was wondering) to go off on the right leg in canter and get all the way round the menage without slowing down near the gate or speeding up down hill then stop the lesson at that point! - and give you and your pony a Polo mint.

So, if after an hour sat at the wheel you finally manage to centre your clay or to make a perfect cylinder then stop and give yourself a Polo. It is really important to hold on to positive energy when learning something new- this will take you into your next session with gusto and build confidence to know that the last thing you did was good.

Also an important point when just starting out is to not try and make something every session- just try and get a grip on one part of the process; i.e. centring, pulling the walls, compressing the base, getting 90 degree angle where the base and the walls meet. I remember spending hours upon hours just centering balls of clay. In the beginning, trying to make an actual 'pot' every time you sit at the wheel means you are setting yourself up for disappointment.

# 6. *technique*

*over strength*

Once you have fallen in love with pottery you want to ensure you are able to keep throwing forever so it is really important to look after your body.

Throwing is essentially about physics and working out how to ensure the wheel (you've potentially just spent a lot of money on) is doing all the hard work. Picking up bad habits at the start will often lead to injury or make your progress as a potter much slower.



The importance of body position when throwing pottery cannot be overstated. You do not have to have masses of upper body strength when throwing, even for larger pots. You just need to get your body position right so you are using your weight and the strength of your bones (not your muscles) to work with the forces of the wheel and not against it.

This kind of harks back to the 'Elbows' point, bracing against your body will give you much more strength and require less effort than trying to brace with just your arm muscles. I often find lots of potters aren't sitting close enough to the wheel head, throwing at arms length is asking way too much of your joints, you should be using the weight of your own body to guide the clay.

You shouldn't come away from a session at the wheel achy. Think hard about minimising pressure on your joints, wrists, knuckles, elbows and back. If you have a weak back; I know quite a few potters who work standing up. Or brace your back against a wall can help.

It is difficult for me to give you individual pointers unless I see you throw but (excluding old injuries) if something is hurting you probably aren't doing it right and need to work out why before you do yourself a mischief.



# 7. *water*

The amount of water you use whilst throwing is key, you don't want your pot to ever be 'sticky' - a sure fire way of getting a wonky pot or pulling it off centre. But at the same time if you use too much water your piece is likely to get smaller and smaller because all the clay you've just spent 30 mins centering will be in your splash pan/water bucket.

If the clay absorbs too much water the walls wont be strong enough to hold themselves up and your beautiful shape will flop. To keep the balance right: try not to flood your pot with water but keep it wet at all times, take out any excess from the base of the pot regularly. Only with a little experience will you be able to get your water usage right.

Here's a nice little bonus tip - I always throw with warm tap water. It's better for your hands. Do you know of any olympic swimmers that train in an ice cold pool? (Well there might be a couple of hardcore Icelandics out there!) Seriously though, if you have ever tried to put a key in your door on an January morning after a dog walk you'll know that cold hands don't quite respond in the way you want them too.

The muscles and ligaments in your hands and fingers work better when they are warm so do yourself a favour- throw with warm water! You want the process to be a nice one.



# bonus tip speed

## 8.

The speed of your wheel is so important. The wheel needs to start out fast and gradually get slower. Centring should be done with your wheel at full speed. This feels so counterintuitive at first but trust me- the faster your wheel is going the easier it is.

Once centred, you need to shift down the gears as your pot gets bigger. You should be at 3/4 speed when opening out and compress the base, then move to 1/2 speed for pulling up the walls- the taller your pot gets the slower your wheel needs to turn.

YOU need to be moving slower than your wheel. If your hands are moving quicker than your clay- you will end up with a wonky pot! Do every step slowly.

Transition your hands from one position to the next s-l-o-w-l-y. Pulling your hands away from the pot too quickly will pull it off centre. Even when you don't have your hands on the clay - move slowly! So many times have I leant over to get a tool and moved too quickly and knocked my beautiful freshly thrown pot clean off.

If you enjoyed my throwing tips, found them helpful or inspiring - take a moment to consider joining Pottery Club. Pottery Club is a place where I share video tutorials, projects, tips, techniques and recommendations. You even get personal help from me whenever you need it! I'd love to see you there.

Click on the below link to find out more about Pottery Club: [karaleighfordceramics.com/community](http://karaleighfordceramics.com/community)  
Happy potting!

*Kara*  
-x-

