Introduction to Fingerloop Braiding

This class will introduce the basic technique of loop-manipulation and a few basic variations. Further patterns can be found in the references listed at the end.

Use and History

Reference to loop-manipulated braids appears in the 1200's. Archaeological finds date from the 13th and 14th centuries. From around the 15th century and into the 16th and 17th centuries, small books appear which include instructions and samples.

Fingerloop braiding was used to produce lacing, hose ties, purse strings, seal tags and similar items. By varying the colours and pattern of the braid, as well as the number of loops used, a wide range of effects can be achieved.

Silk seems to be the most common material for the braids in archaeological finds. Silk has the advantage of being strong and smooth and capable of being dyed in a wide range of colours, which makes it perfect for decorative or heraldic braids. Only a very small amount is needed, which makes it less expensive than might initially seem. Linen or wool can be a less expensive substitute or may be more appropriate for a specific purpose (such as waxed linen for armour ties). *[New - I have recently been given evidence of both extant linen and extant wool braids, from a 15thC find. Article is in the resources below]*

Set-up

1. Cut 5 lengths of your starting thread that are each twice your desired final length, plus a bit. The braid will shrink slightly as it forms, and you need to leave some length for tying off and for your fingers to work in – an extra 10-20cm is usually sufficient. All loops must be the same length or braiding is difficult.
   *In the pictures below, I have used three loops of one colour and two of a second colour. This makes an easy pattern to learn with, and a pretty result –once you get the hang of it, experiment!*

2. Form each length of thread into a loop by folding in half and tie all the ends together.
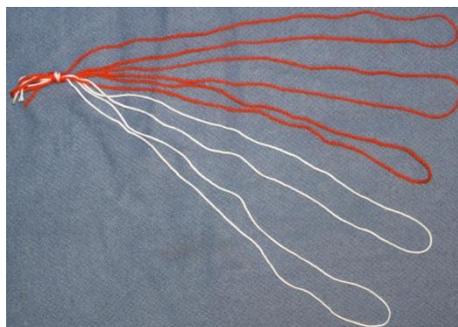
3. Tie the joined end to a fixed structure such as a door handle, chair (if it won't move) or sturdy tent pole, using a scrap piece of thread.

4. Place one loop each on the index, middle and ring finger of your left hand, and on the middle and ring finger of your right hand.
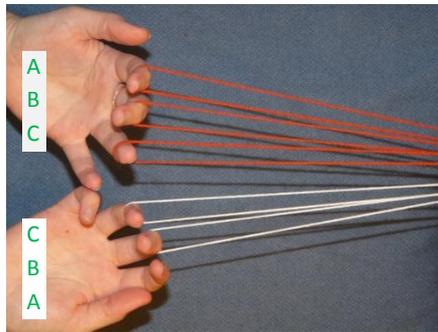
In the period instructions (and many online instructions) these fingers are labelled 'A' 'B' and 'C', where A is your index finger, B the middle and C the ring finger of each hand. I've added this notation below, in case it helps
*You start with a loop on each of A, B and C Left and on B and C Right.*

5. Hold the loops on the pads of your fingertips if you can. You can hold in the crease of each finger *(like I have in these pictures)* until you get used to the technique – but it gets painful very quickly once you are using silk

6. Turn your hands so that they are thumb up, palms facing each other. Each loop now has a top edge *(the bit of string above your finger)* and a bottom edge *(the bit of string running below your finger)*. Put a bit of tension the work by pulling gently against the structure you are tied to.
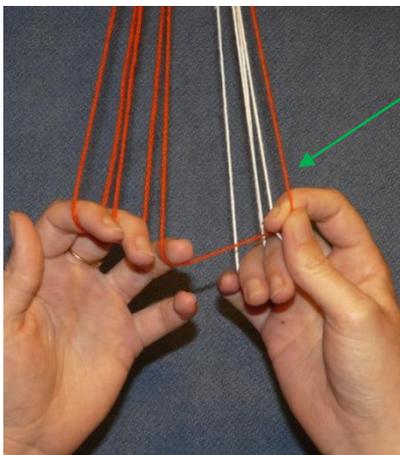

Top edge
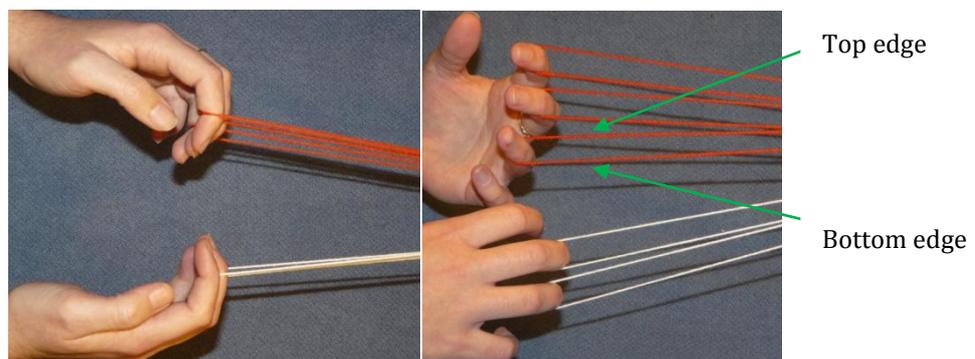
Bottom edge

The Technique

This technique produces a thin, flat braid.

1. Pass your right index finger and thumb through the loop on your right middle finger. Grasp the bottom edge of the loop on your left ring finger.
   *(A Right goes through the loop on B Right)*
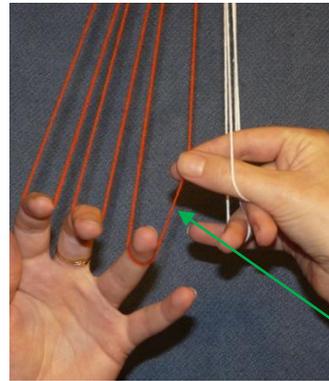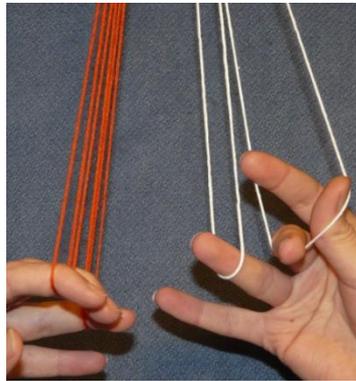


Note, pick up the bottom edge

2. Pull the loop from your left ring finger <u>back through the other loop</u> *(B Right)* so that it now sits on your right index finger. Be sure that the bottom edge of the loop has now become the top edge of the loop – this is known as 'taking reversed'.
   In other words, A Right goes through B Right and takes C Left reversed

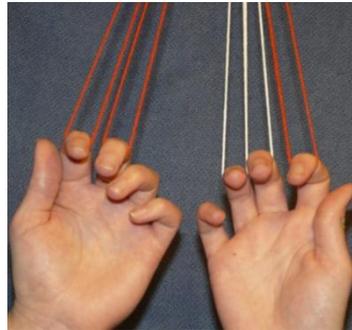Note, bottom edge becomes top edge
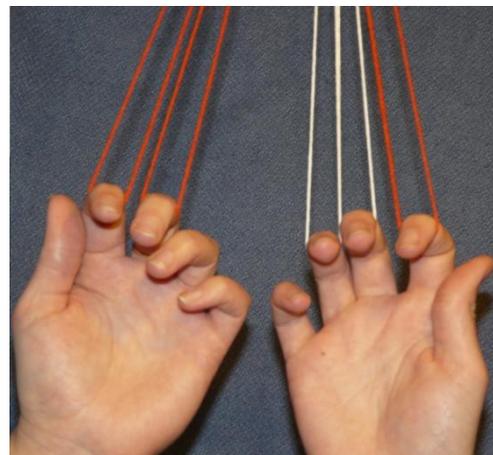
3. Pull your hands apart by stretching out your arms to either side. This will pull the braid snug.
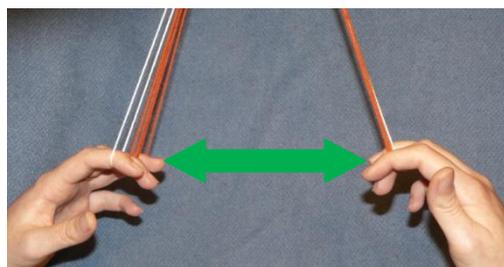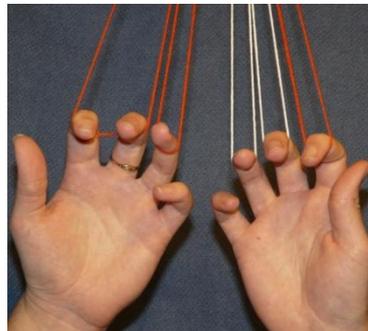
4. You will now have a loop on the index and middle fingers of your left hand, and on the index, middle and ring fingers of your right hand.
    In other words, you now have a loop on A and B Left and on A B and C Right.

    "Walk down" the loops – move the loop from your left middle finger to your empty fourth finger, and the loop from your left index finger to the middle finger.

5. You should now have a mirror image of your starting position - one loop each on the middle and fourth finger of your left hand, and on the index, middle and fourth finger of your right hand. The index finger of your left hand should be free.
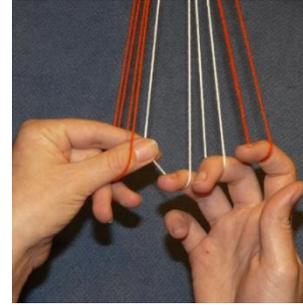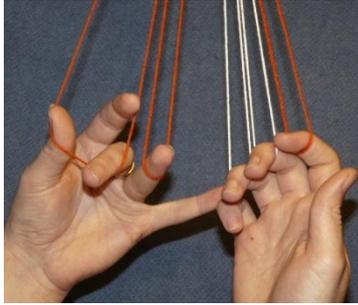   *In other words, you should have a loop on B and C Left and on A, B and C Right.*
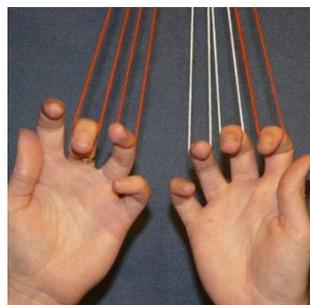
6. Repeat the previous steps with your left hand –use the index finger to move through the loop on the left middle finger, and take the loop from your right ring finger reversed. Walk down the loops on your right hand and tension again.
In other words, A Left through B Left takes C Right reversed.

7. Repeat steps 1 through 6 until you reach the right length, or run out of room. To finish, just drop the loops – it won't unravel. You can tie a knot in the end for neatness if you prefer.

Common issues/Tips

- Don't put down the braid until you're finished. You won't know where to pick up again.
- If you accidentally drop a loop mid-braid, just pick it up and keep going. There might be a small flaw, but there isn't much you can do.
- Keep your hands, elbows and shoulders relaxed to avoid pain, cramps and strain injuries. Tie the braid at a comfortable height for you – I like to set it about elbow height.
- Don't worry if the tension varies along the braid - Variable tension along the finished braid is normal, and part of how these braids are identified in the archaeological record.
- For longer pieces (longer than arm length), enlist an assistant to 'beat' the braid.

Variation

To produce a square braid - pass your index finger through <u>both</u> loops on the working hand, not just the first one.

To produce two small braids at once - pass your index finger through <u>both</u> loops on the working hand and take the loop <u>un</u>reversed – i.e. grasp the top edge of the loop and ensure it remains the top edge once transferred. *[Note – this has been corrected from my hard-copy handouts]*

To produce a broad flat lace that looks like chain links - work through both loops on the working hand, and take the bow unreversed in <u>step 1</u>, but reversed in <u>step 6</u>. This braid will want to curl, but can be flattened out.

For this tutorial, I have kept all loops on each hand the same colour. This gives a braid with alternating blocks of each colour. If you alternate the colours by putting colour 1 on B Left, A Right and C Right, and colour 2 on C Left and B Right, you should get alternating chevrons of colour.

Further variations can be made by creating 'linked '(2-colour) loops, by adding more loops or even engaging 2 or more people in creating the braid. See the references below.

Further Resources

- The Internet has a wide range of sources of fingerloop braiding, from YouTube videos to websites. There are some modern and international variations out there as well. Below are my two favourite sites for medieval pattern interpretations.

    http://fingerloop.org/ has a range of excellent patterns, with easy to follow diagrams for most. It also links to a range of additional pages.

    There is a larger range (including 14 and 16 loop braids) at http://webpages.mcgill.ca/staff/Group2/jhobbi/web/fingerloop/ . Several of these are a bit more advanced (for when you want to branch out).

- Elizabeth Benns and Gina Barrett *Take V Bowes Departed: A 15th Century Braiding Manual Examined* is a discussion and examination of Article 4, British Library Manuscript Harley 2320 – a 15th Century manuscript which gives instructions for around 40 braids. There are interpretations of the instructions included in the later part of the book.

- The 'Museum of London' series have excellent references, particularly for earlier archaeological examples of braids (esp. 14th Century) in the *Textiles and Clothing* and *Dress Accessories* books. However, they do not offer a description of techniques.

    Crowfoot, Elizabeth, Pritchard, F, Staniland, K (1996) *Textiles and Clothing c. 1150-1450*, Medieval Finds from Excavations in London. London; especially pp 130-147.

    Egan, Geoff, Pritchard, Francis (1993) *Dress Accessories c 1150 - c.1450*, Medieval Finds From Excavations in London, London; especially 137, 220, 227-228, 281-291, 342-349.

- *New* - Beatrix Nutz has published an analysis of braids from Lengberg (15thC Austrian castle find). They include several braids in flax/linen, and some in wool. Lots of basic five loop braids, in an apparently domestic context. *Thanks to Mistress Tiffania for telling me about this!*

    Nutz, Beatrix, "Drgens sn wir vs nvt schame - No shame in braiding: 15th century fingerloop braids from Lengberg castle", *Estonian Journal of Archaeology*, 2014, 18(2), 116-134. Publically available online at: http://www.kirj.ee/public/Archaeology/2014/issue_2/arch-2014-2-116-134.pdf