

Your First Carving Tools: A Beginner's Guide

If you want to start carving but aren't sure where to start, this guide can help you to make a minimum investment in a few of the most versatile and beginner-friendly tools.

These are suggestions only: there truly is no one-size-fits-all. You'll only know exactly what tools you need after you put in some time. But I hope these tips will save you some time, money, and confusion as you get started. Enjoy!

-Julia Harrison

IF...	THEN...
You're new to carving Your budget is very limited You want to carve soft materials You want to carve found woods Your designs are small or detailed	consider DISPOSABLE TOOLS pages 4-5
You're new to carving Your budget is more flexible You want to carve wood Your designs are medium-sized You're willing to learn to sharpen	check out REUSABLE TOOLS pages 6-7
You have some carving experience You want to carve harder materials You want to carve larger forms You have a dedicated workspace	keep an eye out for an upcoming guide on INTERMEDIATE CARVING TOOLS

By reading this guide, you understand that Julia Harrison is an arts educator and the Owner of Julia Harrison, LLC. Our purpose is to encourage more people to develop a creative carving practice.

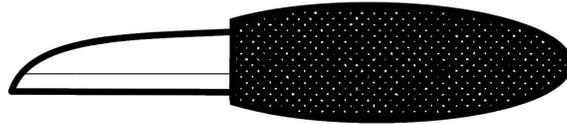
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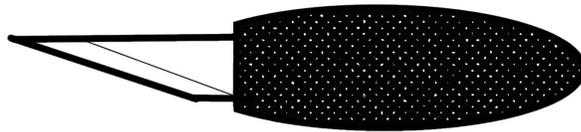
A COUPLE OF THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND for either disposable or reusable tools

Relative to the handle, a cutting edge may be:

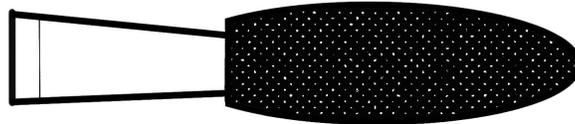
parallel



diagonal



perpendicular



Tools with a diagonal or perpendicular blade orientation are more versatile and easier for many beginners to use.

KNIVES OUT?

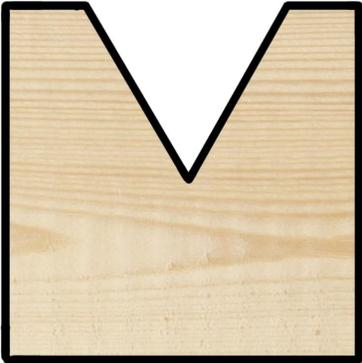
You won't find information on pocket knives or more specialized carving knives in this document. Although common, familiar, and seemingly simple, I find that knives are not especially beginner-friendly. Their longer blades can cause more strain and injuries, and they can be challenging to sharpen correctly.

The shape of the cutting edge (as seen from head on) is the tool's "profile" and this will determine the shape of the cut the tool makes. These differences make different profiles useful for different forms or situations.

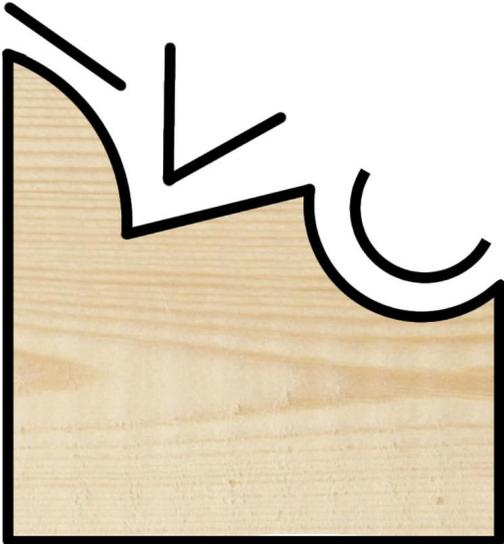
A flat tool
cuts planes, corners, and
convex surfaces



A V-shaped tool
cuts interior corners and
details



A C- or U-shaped tool
rapidly removes excess
material, cuts concavities



In practice, of course, most complex forms are made up of a variety of different simple shapes, and so you will need to use a few different tools in combination to carve them.

DISPOSABLE TOOLS

Why choose a disposable tool?

- For small-scale carvings or using soft materials
- For carving convex shapes and details
- For working with found wood (dirt or sand will dull your tools pretty quickly)
- To avoid learning how to sharpen until you are sure you like carving (sharpening is an important skill, but it takes additional time, effort, and supplies)
- To try out carving without making much of an investment

For this approach, you'll need:

- a reusable handle
- a disposable blade

Most handles are X-Acto-style, with a slot at the end that pinches the blade and a ferrule that screws to hold it securely in place. There are actually many brands to choose from (my own favorite handle is an Olfa).

Choose a handle that:

1. feels comfortable and fits your hand

There are so many options! The traditional aluminum tube, or plastic, or wood, handles with padding or ergonomic profiles, and in different sizes. When carving I hold my tool in several different positions, so I prefer not to use an ergonomic handle that dictates you hold it in a certain way. My favorite handle is small (like my hands), cylindrical (versatile grip), and plastic (not cold) with notches (improved grip).

2. fits your blade

The back end of the blade should fit neatly into the handle; a blade that's too big just won't fit, and one that's too small might seem to fit but will be likely to slip or fall out while you're carving. The most common blades fit into one of two handle sizes: Type A handles for smaller blades and Type B/C/D handles for larger.

3. holds your blade securely

Sometimes you will have done everything right and the handle just doesn't keep its grip on the blade because it's worn out or defective. Get a new one.

There are also handles especially for scalpel blades. **I don't recommend scalpel handles for carving** since the motion of carving can cause the blade to detach from the handle. Scalpels are a little small for X-Acto handles so when using them together I close the ferrule tightly and check often to make sure that it isn't coming loose.

DISPOSABLE BLADES

SCALPELS	X-ACTO-style BLADES
<p>Pros</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● huge range of shapes ● incredibly sharp ● flexible (good for delicate cuts) ● stay sharp quite a while 	<p>Pros</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● huge range of shapes and sizes ● widely available ● lower price ● rigid, less likely to break
<p>Cons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● incredibly sharp (never forget that these are MADE to cut flesh) ● can snap under pressure ● more expensive ● available from specialty suppliers* ● perhaps more useful for intermediate carvers 	<p>Cons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● not terribly sharp ● go dull quickly
<p>*when buying from medical suppliers it is fine to get the cheaper non-sterile version</p>	

Shopping tip

If you're not sure which blade shapes will be most useful, try buying an assortment that includes a number of different shapes. When you hone in on the ones you like best, you can buy those in bulk. X-Acto also makes blades that are based on woodcarving chisels; these will not work as well as real chisels but again offer a lower-cost option for sampling different tool shapes.

REUSABLE TOOLS

If you are ready to invest in reusable tools, there are three shapes (“profiles”) of chisel I recommend. These will allow you to carve a wide variety of forms and are still the tools I use most often for my work. Remember that you will also need to invest in sharpening equipment and learn to use it.

<p>C- or U-shape (aka “sweep” or “gouge”)</p>	 A photograph showing three different chisels with C- or U-shaped profiles. They are laid out on a light-colored, cracked surface. One chisel is a simple U-shape, another is a C-shape, and the third is a more complex profile with a curved end. A small piece of wood is visible near the bottom right chisel.
<p>V-shape (“parting tool” or “veiner”)</p>	 A photograph showing three different chisels with V-shaped profiles. They are laid out on a light-colored, cracked surface. One is a simple V-shape, another is a wider V-shape, and the third is a more complex profile with a curved end. A small piece of wood is visible near the bottom center.



SIZES / STYLES

Any of these profiles will be available in many different sizes and handle styles. When choosing, keep in mind:

- the size of the work you want to make
- the size of your hands
- how much room you have for storing tools

BRANDS

There are many great options available, and I certainly haven't tried them all. I came across the Flexcut brand about 15 years ago and I've stuck with them for my basic tools for these reasons:

- they're affordable and widely available
- the steel is high quality and the tools are sharp out of the box
- there's a wide range of sizes and profiles
- many tools are available either with permanent handles, or as interchangeable blades that snap into different handles; the snap-on blades are versatile, portable, and save space
- they have a proprietary sharpening system that is inexpensive, simple, and relatively easy to use

Beginner kits are available but if I were choosing my tools from scratch I'd get these three profiles with either fixed handles or an interchangeable handle.

- 45 deg. x 5/32" (4mm) Parting Tool
- #2 x 9/16" (15mm) Skew Double Bevel
- #8 x 3/8" (10mm) Sweep

MY RULES OF CHISEL OWNERSHIP

1. Don't buy more than you need; start with 2-3 and grow your collection as appropriate.
2. Don't waste your money on cheap tools.
3. Treat your tools with care: keep the ends capped or covered when not in use, and never let a cutting edge touch another piece of metal!

Of course this information barely scratches the surface, but **it took me about 5 years to get this far on my own!** I'm happy to be able to share and hope that you'll take the plunge and try carving. I really can't imagine my life without it.

If you found this information helpful, or if you'd like to suggest additional tools please get in touch at hello@juliaharrison.net. If you'd like to receive future guides and worksheets, please be sure to sign up for my mailing list at www.juliaharrison.net.

Happy carving!

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