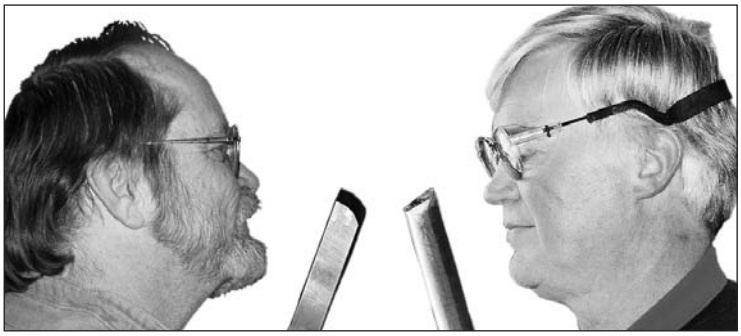
In defense of your favorite Skew



Alan Lacer, left, and Nick Cook, right, have differing views on the best skew. Both are contributing editors to the *American Woodturner*.

Nick Cook and Alan Lacer are well known in turning circles as master skew practitioners. Wherever they teach classes or demonstrate, they spread the gospel of a turning foundation based on skew skills. And do these long-time friends embrace the same skew profile? Not exactly.

Nick Cook's view Why oval skews are best

Is the skew evil? No, not really—it just seems that way to most beginning woodturners. I even thought the skew was an evil tool at one time. I blame that on Rude Osolnik, the grand old man of woodturners. As a student of Rude, he told me to "Throw that damn thing away, you can do everything on a spindle with either a big roughing gouge or the 1/2" spindle gouge." So he was not very helpful when it came to learning to use the skew.

I wasn't convinced that it was really that bad, so I decided to learn it on my own. I soon discovered that it really wasn't that bad. It even feels good when you learn to use a skew properly.

When I first started using the skew, the only ones available were the standard, rectangular shape made of carbon steel. I think my first was either a Buck Brothers or Craftsman. It had a fairly short handle and an even shorter bevel, maybe 45 degrees or so. It required constant sharpening because carbon steel really does not hold an edge very well. So, I started exploring other possibilities. I tried every size and shape I could find.

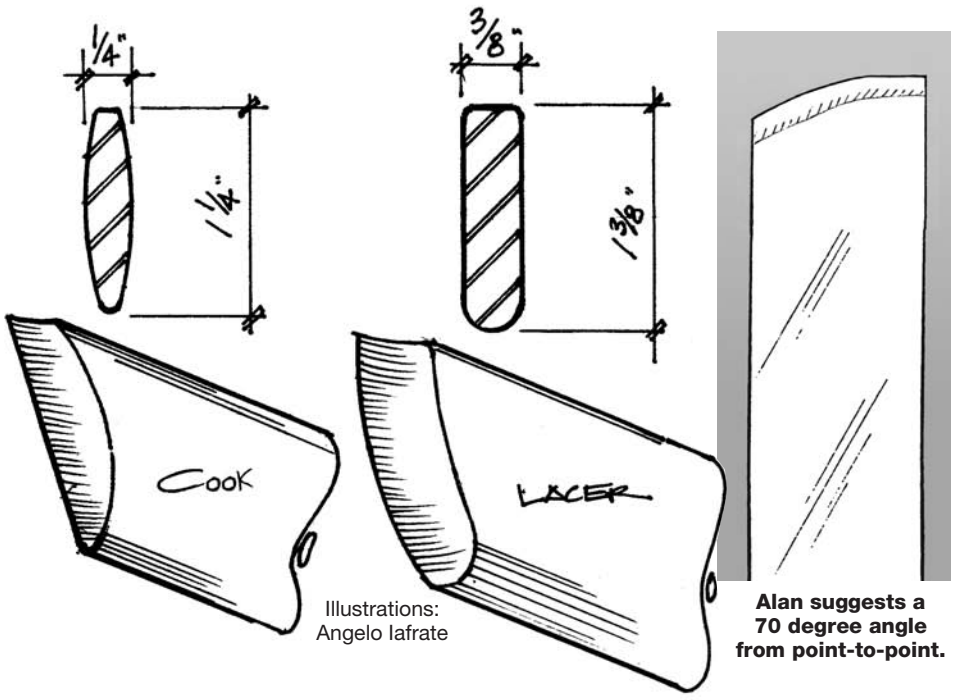
I now have more than a dozen different skews. They range from 1/4" (flat and round), 3/8" round, 1/2" flat (round and oval), 1/2" (flat and oval), 1" flat, oval and curved), 1 1/4" (flat and oval) and one 2" flat.

I also have several sizes of the spindle master. I have found that it is a good alternative to the skew. It is very user friendly in both sharpening and cutting.

Of all my skews, the 1 1/4" oval is my personal favorite. It's the one I recommend for my students and the one I use most often. I even insist that students learn to use the skew first before going on to other tools. I think the larger size (1 1/4") and the oval profile make it much easier to learn than the traditional rectangular shape.

The oval skew was also the first to have a rounded edge on the short side. Many of the newer skews on the market now come with this edge rounded. This alone makes it easier to move across the length of the tool rest. I also like the lighter weight of the oval skew. I find it better balanced and easier to manage on stock up to about 3 1/2" to 4" diameter. I prefer a larger, heavier skew for stock larger than 4".

As for the skew angle, the basic 70 degree angle works best for me. I also like this angle to be straight



Illustrations:
Angelo Iafrate

Alan suggests a 70 degree angle from point-to-point.

rather than curved like the signature Richard Raffan skew. I have a curved oval skew—it works well for roughing and smoothing a cylinder. The curved edge places the center one-third working area out ahead of both the toe and the heel. This makes it fairly aggressive and less likely to get a catch. This also helps to keep both the toe and heel of the tool from digging into the workpiece. At the same time, the curved edge makes cutting V's and rolling beads more difficult.

When it comes to sharpening and honing, I like the longer bevels that are standard on the oval skews. The bevels are between 20 and 22 1/2 degrees. I prefer to use the Tormek sharpening system and the specially designed skew jig for grinding my skew. The large 10" wheel, ultra slow speed (90 rpm) and the water bath render a uniform hollow grind that is razor sharp. Between grindings, I use the leather strop charged with 6000-grit honing compound to refine the edge.

When a Tormek is not available, I use a fine oil stone or diamond hone to keep my skew sharp. I never sharpen my skew with a standard grinder—even one that turns at 1800 rpm is much too aggressive for me.

Even though most beginners are intimidated by the skew, I usually start them out with it. It is not all that bad once they get over the initial shock. Beginners usually find that it is a very versatile tool. They soon discover that it leaves a surface that requires little sanding. I think that is reason enough to learn to use the skew.

Alan Lacer's opinion

Traditional skews are best

I love my traditional skew. But before I explain why, let me tell you what's wrong with the oval skew.

1. Hard to sharpen. The oval profile "rocks" on the rest or your fingers. It's very hard to keep it in one grinding plane for each side, let alone get two planes parallel. Solutions: Get a grinding jig or firm pressure in the middle of the tool.

2. Flimsy. You can flex the small oval skews in your hand. This translates to more bouncing of the tool when doing cuts other than light finishing cuts, requires more pressure on the tool rest to reduce this problem, and can lead to ribbing in denser woods when making a long planing cut.

3. Changing presentation. Andy Barnum first pointed out to me that when rolling a oval skew (and rubbing the bevel) the presentation or relationship of the edge to the work changes as you roll the cut. I find you must add one more action to what is already a complex series of moves. Generally this rolling cut gives turners the most difficulties; the oval section does not improve the chances for consistent success.

4. Impossible peel cut. Almost impossible to do a "peeling" cut as you do not have

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a flat plane with the tool's cross-section to establish the cutting angle. This is a very important cut for removing the corners (roughing) on smaller length and diameter projects, rapidly removing waste material, or cutting tenons for preparing a block for a chuck.

5. Unstable with long point down. The tiny flat area along the top of the tool and behind the long point is insufficient for stability on a broad number of cuts with the long point down.

Embrace the traditional skew

Here are reasons why I like a traditional skew chisel made from rectangular steel. I prefer a heavyweight version of the traditional skew—at least 5/16" thick and preferably 3/8" thick.

1. The rectangular cross section makes this one of the very easiest of all turning tools to sharpen. For a straight grind, set the angle of the grinder's rest, place the cutting edge 90 degrees to the face of the wheel (or parallel to the grinder's axis), and sharpen. No jig is required. For the curved edged skew, I add a pivoting action to follow the tool's shape.

2. The increased heft of a thicker skew aids in heavy cuts and in working denser hardwoods. This translates into more power, less force is required to hold the tool on the rest, and ribbing or chatter work is reduced.

3. A cut I use on almost every project is the peeling cut. This is performed by using a portion of the edge (not the entire long cutting edge) much like a veneer peeler working on a log: It is not a scraping cut nor is it a finishing cut. It is using the skew much like a large parting tool—but with a wider cut, more support and much more control than a regular parting tool. It is particularly effective in removing corners on woods that are "chippy" like red oak or cocobolo. It works far better on those woods than using a planing approach as it virtually eliminates the riving action associated with the planing cut.

4. Because many of the cuts (shoulder, Vee, pommel, saucer, and parting cuts) are often done with the long point down, the tool rest bears most of the tool's weight. Thus, increased weight is not generally a problem.

5. The rectangular cross-section of the tool makes for a more consistent action when rolling a convex shape (beads, balls, egg form). The cut often begins just below the center line of the tool and finalizes with the long cutting edge in a vertical position. The consistent cross section allows for a smooth pivoting action that little changes the relationship of the resting point to the cutting edge—even when cutting at different sections of the edge.

6. Here's how to achieve the oval skew's primary aim—a tool that maneuvers easily along the rest—but without the tradeoffs. (A growing number of skews are sold with this profile.) Round the short point (or heel) side of the skew all the way back to the ferrule, and soften or chamfer the corners behind the long point (or toe) back to the ferrule. I find this is most easily done with a belt sander or grinder--and must only be done once in the life of the tool.